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RUM AND GREEN GINGER

Rum and Green Ginger

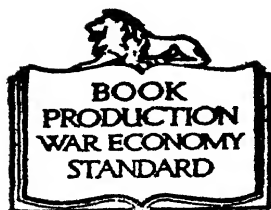
A Novel

R. G. NETTELL

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RUM AND GREEN GINGER

CHAPTER I

A LONG loan comes laughing home, they said in Forbye about the rags and rents when at last it was returned.

On the kerb of the station-approach, Cathie put down her dressing-case and made a few unnecessary plucks at the lace shawl perfectly arranged for the babe on her arm; she gave herself another moment of grace by uncovering the blue veined temple, peeping at the milk-blue lids, and then her hand touched all into place, as another woman's might have fluttered over her hair.

The easy way of coming home would have been to ring up the office of David Mould, Builder and Funeral Director, to have them send around one of her father's cars, but it meant only a postponement of this, the first time when she had to face the town. It was not like Cathie to search for ways out, to avoid difficulties; had there been a taxi she might have taken it, but since there was none waiting, she would go through Forbye with her head up, and they could all stare or stone as they chose.

Finger by finger, she drew off her left glove and held it in her hand, as if to flick it in the town's face, and looked up the short length of street leading into Forbye Cross, like a Christian seeing the dark entrance to the arena where the lions waited.

"Well, pet, this is us. At least they won't eat us . . . quite."

She picked up the case, with her smartest hat hanging from the handle; Forbye knew Cathie Mould better hatless, and as a concession to her home-town, she carried it rather than offend by its expensive frivolity. One shock at a time, she had thought; even had she been less considerate of their feelings, there had been no opportunity to put it on before a dressing-mirror.

The silvered clasps gleamed in the grey afternoon, the damp curled her hair and dimmed it to the sheen of old

wedding rings; yet it was bright enough on that street for folk to look at her as she passed, and then to turn their heads to look again. Cathie seemed to spare no glance at anyone; she walked up towards the Cross almost with a smile on her red mouth, as if she were coming home and glad of it, as if this grimy little town and its folk were hers and she was of it, and they would have to take her whether they liked her or not.

The pavements of Forbye are sticky underfoot when it has been raining; the mud film patterns like a grey frost on a dirty window pane as it sucks and snaps at the passing feet. Not that there are many dim windows on the street; shop fronts and houses above, they all shine like dark mirrors by a Friday night, with a hint of iridescence from the paraffin which had gone on the cloth to cut the grease. The industrial dirt which is chased and scoured from the front steps, trim with their holystoned edges or cardinal red, settles on the roadway as if the oil-wash from the face of the buildings had been upset and never dried there, bringing street and town and air to tone with the sky of sombre grey.

Her shoes made blurred marks as she went, with the slime in a rim where it squeezed to the edge, and then spreading back to hide her footsteps, leaving no more record of her passing than of the many other times she had been that way; as a child dawdling behind her mother to the shops, later to school and going with her father to the Gospel Mission. And now to come like this.

From a close, children bored with play watched her, and one came out and aped her walk in a wide sweep, which took him beside her for a few paces and then back to the entrance, perhaps disappointed that she had not seemed to notice; their singing game tried to follow her.

*"A golden ring she has not got, has not got, has not got,
A golden ring she has not got, my fair lady."*

She felt again that sickening rush of panic in her heart; whenever it came, at those times her burden was almost more than she could bear.

A tramcar had grumbled away impatiently from the stop as she reached the Cross; it served her right, for if she had

stepped out smartly from the train she would have caught it. Now she would have to wait, solitary on the empty island, looking up and down the street for any change in all the months she had been away, and seeing none. The Cross was Forbye on any dull afternoon and the folk were the same, all making the background for the change in her, Cathie Mould; or for the change in every one of the individual selves who moved there, from the more prosperous shopkeepers to the idlers on the steps of the burgh offices, steps too broad to be taken in one stride and yet not broad enough for two; you went down them step-hop, step-hop until you felt like a wean on the staircase at home, and then had to take them in one if it were to split you, which it very nearly did.

There was a steel-blue light above the lettered window of the surgery opposite and Jimmy Muirburn's car stood at the kerb outside. If he were to come out now and see her, suppose she waved, would he take her home? Straight up through the centre of Forbye, in the doctor's car, side by side with him, acknowledging the folk as they recognised him. Cathie smiled; Dr. Jimmy, her brother-in-law now; how poor Margaret would shrink from his doing anything so public. For that matter, Margaret would be doing quite a bit of shrinking this weather, without a sister coming home with her shame.

Her arm cuddled it closer to her coat, still sleeping like a treasure, although how soon now she might be waking to cry for the breast she could only guess, and look with relief down to the corner, as the sounds of a car came from the dip of the street. When it drew up it was for the Cross; folk tumbled off before it pulled away to turn at the switch, no one she knew well enough to speak to, although many perhaps knew her, or would remember later who she was. It was no use to hope she would pass in the crowd unrecognised, baby and all, when for years she had been distinguished from her schoolfellows and from other girls in the place simply by a half-glance at her hair; Red Cathie she was to the town, for the town's descriptive powers were apt to be strained if it went beyond the primary colours.

As she turned back to the island she saw at the upper side of the Cross, among the gossips at the corner, two, no three, who had recognised her; old Wattie McQuart and Alick

McCracken from her father's workshops and their crony, the one they called Apple Johnnie, if he had another name she had never heard it. With the width of North Street and more between them, she had no need to wonder if she should smile; they would have seen her bundle. To save embarrassment all around, if embarrassment was to be in the air, she had only to turn again to watch for her car and leave them to exclaim behind her back, the day's excitement assured for them and more to come, speculating on what would happen now in the fine stone house in Flechan Street.

If you were a Forbye man, whenever you wanted to see a crony and he was not in the house it was usual to take a daunder down to the Cross and there, on the wide stone sill of a window or down on your hunkers against the shelter of a wall, you waited for him to come by. Mostly it was the elder men who sat on the sills; they were more out of the draughts there, with the way the windows were set deep into the walls like tired eyes, and those stone seats were polished smooth and shining by the tweed and moleskin backsides that had stirred and shifted as the sitters had leaned first one way and then another to see who was abroad, or just to spit out on the paving. Those who squatted on their heels against the wall were miners, their white faces told that; miners were always either black or pasty white, and there was only colour in their faces when it was driven there by anger or coughing. Not that this did not give them plenty of opportunity to colour up; Forbye was a rare place for coughs and all the men were dandy spitters; whether it was the damp, or the cold winds playing tig around every corner, or the consumption which added to the discomfort of someone in almost every house, but you could be sure of hearing a good hoast along any street; while incomers swore they had only to look at the paving and the gobs which lay about like a shower of shillings to know where they were by the cheughness of the spittle.

And it was there you went if you wished to meet, for all roads come down to the Cross. If you were young and sure of yourself, you joined in with the others and stood on the kerb with the soles of your shoes half across the gutter, so you had to balance every time you laughed or leaned back

to look after a girl, and with your hands deep in your pockets, fiddling with coins and whatnot, and making folk walk around you if they wanted to get off the road. Everyone knew the places about the Cross where one could stand, and the others where one wouldn't; those from the old town kept to the south side, while the upper and new town had the north and the hope of any sunshine which might be going, and the dignity of the office steps. It was not so good there when it rained, when the wind blew up from the city and seemed so glad to finish the ten miles of the road that it rushed around the Cross, determined to find you out, and was fairly loath to get on, but whirled about until the air was so thickened with rain that you had almost to stop breathing and take to drinking it. At other times, a snell east wind would come in down Main Street, a wind which would circumcise you, as cold and cutting as the folk who came in by the buses with it, all tweed and flat feet and with voices as though they were being throttled but were too well-bred to mention it.

North Street let in flurries of snow to waltz about and down your neck if you didn't keep a scarf knotted tight against it; it was queer stuff for drifting into your clothes, making you think that although it was great to wear the kilt, there was something to be said for tempering pride with creature comfort, and again to think of the lassies with their skirts all blown about and to wonder they were not ticklish, you couldn't have stood still yourself with the flakes creeping about and melting on you. At times the sun shone up South Street; at noon it could be warm against the walls, even for folk who had come up from the old town, and no doubt they were not particular about the smells which came up with them from the railway yards, and from the town burn and all that went in to it. That was a road which had come far, from Lanark and the south folk said; they even said it started still further off, beyond Carlisle perhaps, although some found it hard to picture places so far away, with the folk living there long ago making the road up all that distance so as to get to Forbye Cross.

Without stretching himself, Dr. Jimmy Muirburn could see over the screening on the dispensary window the folk going their ways about the Cross; like Harvey studying the circu-

lation of the blood, he watched the beating heart of Forbye, its venous streams and the flow of its main artery, but without any of the keen interest of the discoverer. Little grey folk of a little grey town, a skip-cap place where only gentlemen wore hats and the very sky was a shoddy rag pulled over their heads, like the shawls of shapeless women in their recurrent pregnancies, a race which seemed by environment and appetite content to change almost overnight from the swing of youth to the sway of old flesh.

These walking beneath his window were the rump of the practice, a tenement and room-and-kitchen clientele, among which he had to scuffle for the shillings which kept him in his junior partnership, while the other practitioners called upon the brassoed doors of Slobhill at half-a-guinea a knob. Looking at them, Jimmy hated collectively the whole broth of the Cross and individually the scum which collected at the edges; he liked to fancy himself with the prophylactic aura and the right manner among the fresh-linened beds of a west end, and yet knowing when it came to the job he always sweated for the life of a tuberculous miner and lost his patience with the far more profitable ailments of the bigger houses. From the selection before him, he tried to pick samples to feed his feelings, to prove the sound theories dinned into him by Margaret that a doctor, to do himself and his profession justice, had to get the balance between wisdom only for the pence and nothing but foolishness with the pounds.

On the far side of the Cross he saw Apple Johnnie keeping dry in his favourite window seat; without a fair word in his belly for one decent fellow townsman was Johnnie, and it would have been a public service to let him burn himself out with his own acidity, except that it was owed to the humbler philosophies to keep his body and soul together. And his crony beside him, old Wattie McQuart, by trade a gossip, helped out perhaps with some joinery; no character was safe from that tongue, although it damned in all innocence out of a gentle human interest; God help you when he lifted your name, and forgive you if you scolded him for doing it. Not like Mrs. McNulty going down there towards the station, that well-doing wife of Lower Jenny's, who personified the better class of butter-woman and believed in latter-day saints

and original sin, making it her lifework to find one in the other.

Jimmy hoped, out of personal spite and professional interest, that her hens would die and her daughters abort; not that there was much chance of either. It was only with a decent little slut like Sheilie Healy there, her face mere candle-wax, that such things happened; remember the time she had the stuff from a woman in Ireland, if it had been any later when her mother found her on the kitchen floor and had called him to her, they could have saved their money, the place was like the scene of murder as it was.

And there was old Davie Mould, his father-in-law, on the way down the street; going to the office to fix up someone's death and burial, they would say. Poor Davie, he had his troubles in these days, and bore them cheerfully, as if they were the will of God, without knowing how much closer he walked to a meaner culprit; they said that he carried out the villainies which had made him, if not actually with the name of God on his lips, at any rate with the love of his fellow men in his heart. Some called him a bible thumping old hypocrite, and perhaps he was; it would depend on what they themselves believed in, and that would be in nothing; worse than Davie's faith, which seemed to be to rob the rich and give one-tenth to the poor. In Forbye there could be worse creeds than that, and creeds better housed; one up at the Park, Mr. Oliver Royal's, whose head was held as high as any in the place unless it was his mother's, her neck would make a specimen if only for the extra vertebrae and not for the brass in it. He gave his tenth all right and more, but he took it from the wrong source; Apple Johnnie swore the Royal safe-deposit fairly reeked of sweat, but of course he would the old cynic; a peck of salt was needed by any who listened to his tales. Look at him now, wagging his stick to draw their attention to someone coming up to the Cross, another good name going down the stank.

Jimmy, with his eye almost bruised by the sash, took an oblique squint at the near corner to see what had caused the flutter. He saw, and as he drew back it was his own heart which knocked. He had not seen her face as she waited for the traffic to pass, but all the town would know Cathie Mould by her hair; like new copper when it caught the sun, even now

it brightened the street. It was the white shawl on her arm which had caught his eye, and the eyes of the old men across the road, and he looked again at her hair for it to deny the fact, that this was Cathie, that she was there in daylight for them all to see the baby she had come by, for their eyes to spit upon her. Crossing with the lights, she had lost nothing of her proud walk; there was almost more of it, now she must know they were watching; the golden hair might have been a crown, although that was nothing new, but she carried the baby as if it were a sceptre in the crook of her arm, and turned as she reached the island, and looked up and down the street as if the greasy mud she had walked on was velvet cloaks they had spread for her. She might have stepped straight from the shop, with a hat in her hand lest it spoil the set of her hair; she stood like a queen in her own right, like a loved daughter in her father's house, letting the folk pass her and accepting their interest with as little concern as if she herself were a picture on the wall of their home.

Out of all the mixture of emotions tumbled on him by the sight of her, Jimmy felt the strongest was relief to see her, to see that from this distance she seemed to be nothing different, to be still Cathie, the girl he had been half in love with all the time he courted her sister, who had him tangled in that glorious hair any time she turned a glance on him, so that if she had beckoned he would have left even Margaret and gone bounding to her. And though he knew now if he were the last man on earth she would not soil her shoe by turning him over at her feet, he thanked heaven for it. Suppose she too had tried those desperate remedies he knew girls recommended to each other, or fallen to some quack with a promise to see her right, she might have been another waxen-faced ruin behind the locks of respectability, rouge like bay willow on her virgin cheek.

He saw she had noticed the car outside, and he stepped further back as she looked up to the lighted window of the surgery; it seemed as if she knew of his watching, because he fancied she smiled, quiet and bitter, thinking perhaps that he might have come out of his hiding and stood with her this time when she was friendless, that if he was anything of a good-billie he would have lifted her from the Cross and taken her away from the folk who gazed at her. And so he

would have done, if he could have been sure she would have let him, without a gibe at what Margaret might say of such a public condonation of her folly, knowing that it would be plenty and hard to bear; and another at himself, feigning her surprise that he should come to be seen with the little sister he had flirted with now she was out in her true colour for all the town to scorn.

What in the Name was going to happen now? Margaret's cheek had flamed when she learned that her mother was adding to the family, after years which made it seem almost an indiscretion, and Cathie's warning of what more was coming had burned her in the family shame. She had hard work to squeeze out sympathy now her mother's baby had died, and here was Cathie coming home to blow on the ashes.

She was looking down the street at a car coming by her father's office; he too must have heard it, for there he was, running almost to be up behind it. He could not know who was waiting, or it would have been enough to send him back behind the door to cross himself.

Jimmy saw Apple Johnny and his fellows shuffle their seats on the hard sills and settle themselves, waiting for the curtain to go up.

Mrs. McNulty was in and out most of the doors on Main Street, as much to get the chat as to do her messages. The shopkeepers spared themselves a moment as they served to peer over the top of the window backs to see who passed, and then gathered their stock together with a quick eye, lest a customer had whipped some oddment into her bag. Lizzie MacGrum, the sweetie-wife, had remarked that it was awful weather as she trickled boilings on to the scale, and as one turned, agreeing, to confirm it by a glance out of the door, quick as winking she had the poke off and was screwing it ready to hand over. Across the way, Ritchie the grocery had the advantage of bigger windows with less in them, and it was a wonder his eyes were not wrenched apart through trying to watch street and shop at the same time, although it wasn't easy to tell which he had his mind on, the off-licence most likely and how much water he could put in with the whisky.

"There's Mr. Mould away by," he said, with the tip of his

long whetted knife helping up the weight pan. "They say this morning the baby died. Aye, it's awful sad."

Mrs. McNulty took the packet of ham showing pink through the greaseproof, and laid it away to rest in her shopping basket, as respectfully as Mr. Mould himself might in the way of his trade.

"Yes, it is sad."

She was thinking what more could the old fool be expecting from his wife at her age? The shakings of the poke, they were saying, and he should be grateful for His mercies; with one family just about grown, who would want to be starting another? Any more of it and he'd be making himself a laughing stock in the town. And as Ritchie said, at their time of life one would hope to be ashamed, yet there was Mr. Mould just down the street, his face all kindness and mostly clean shaven, and no doubt looking for the sympathy he did not deserve.

"And is Mrs. Mould bad?"

"I've no' heard; though I doubt she'll be upset."

"Oh, aye. A woman doesno' like to lose a wean," said another shopper.

"That's a fact. But she'll be getting past having bairns about the place now; it'll maybe prove a blessing, the way it is."

"It may well do that. There's One who plans these things for us," said Mrs. McNulty.

"There is," said Ritchie, as he totted up the purchases, with much spanning of fingers and flourishing of his pencil, and taking care to count in the butter twice over. "And we can trust in those plans."

His assurance was given as confidently as if he were recommending a reliable factor to the owner of a small property. It fairly sets a man up when he can see that everything for his neighbours is being arranged by providence just exactly as he would have done it for them himself. At most times down by the Cross, there were to be seen a few folk whose life plans may have been oversights on Ritchie's part, if he were responsible for them, although they might have been drawn up on his weekly half-shut day without his collaboration. Mrs. McNulty could not have approved of them herself, or folk would say she was no better; there was that young

Healy woman, Irish of course and a thoroughly bad besom, what she had done with herself was nobody's business and anyone's guess, it had left her ripe for their extreme unction by the look of her, a prayer of faith indeed it would take to raise her up. It was encouraging to find the Lord dealing heavily with those who were no better than they ought to be, nor even half as good, and with those who contributed to the risks in the close-mouth shadows; and Mrs. McNulty had been thinking lately that the slackness she had noticed must be spreading dangerously in Forbye, because not only were folk doing immoral things, but they were done with an easy conscience. When a prominent man and a leader of the Gospel Mission, in his days which were surely numbered, turned from spiritual things as he had done, not only was it scarcely decent nor an example to younger men, but it made it awkward for nicer-minded women, who had grown daughters and were anxious to turn their thoughts from the bestial side of human nature, to have a woman of years, and apparently of so sweet and gentle a character as Mrs. David Mould, walking like an apology for carnality in their midst. Was it any wonder their own girl had gone astray if there was no better influence in the home?

There was in this, she felt, direct support of her own belief that the cleanest doorstep could be at the entrance to the foulest kennel.

It was a good thing there were people in the town who held up the high standards, proper ladies like Mrs. Royal of Forbye Park; a blessing perhaps that her son's wife had been called to rest, for a poor peerie-wearie creature like Euphie Boyce was out of place as mistress of the big house; having no social background with her father in counter trade she could never have managed the money the Royals were known to be rolling in. Folk could say what they liked—and Mrs. McNulty glared at those good-for-nothing idlers on the corner as though they had challenged her—but breeding tells; her worst enemy could never call her a snob, but she did believe that while quite good work was done by such clean-living moral persons as herself, money talked and folk listened and acted upon what it said.

That would be the doctor's car outside the surgery door. Young Dr. Muirburn, now he was married, could be called

to the house without the fear that his interest in the girls might not be all professional, a relief to any mother's mind. Not that she had any reason to suspect, but folk said some very unpleasant things with less cause, and then he had been known to give far too much attention to that red-headed Cathie Mould, while all the time he was supposed to be courting her sister, and now everyone knew exactly what had become of her; she was walking the streets of London. At one time there had been a whisper that he was really more interested in the little . . . no, it was best not even to think that nasty word, but it described the girl so exactly that it rose at once to the tongue. Yet better nature had won, and it was nice that he had married the only girl in the family who had what breeding there was, who did seem conscious of her position.

Mrs. McNulty remembered that it was some while since she had seen the doctor's wife; the poor girl would be conscious of the family trouble, but all the same, the next time she could speak to him, she must certainly inquire; there was quite often a clue in the way young husbands answered, although from the past she knew Dr. Jimmy was almost boorish in ordinary conversation. This was a pity, and to her mind rather spoiled a very attractive manner, because much opportunity of making himself interesting to his patients was lost, with him more or less without a tongue in his head.

She was drawing for herself a parallel with the buried talents when she had the first glimpse of Cathie among the caps and dingy hats on the other pavement, coming up the hill, a golden knot in that dark tapestry. Never very ready to believe her eyes, any more than she put a great deal of faith in direct speech—it was her own interpretation of what she saw and heard that became facts to Mrs. McNulty—she hastened over to see again the pottery boys and girls in the furnishers, those figures which were set in parlour windows by folk who would chase a child for its life if it chalked their front gate, and to be in a position to turn from admiring their gastric colourings to cold shoulder Cathie, if this was the Moulds' family trouble actually returning to the town.

Oh, it was she all right, straight off the train; there was no disguising that head of hair, and she had not even the decency to cover it, but must parade the street like the scarlet whore of Babylon with the fruit of her sin for all to see, just as if

she had been made an honest woman. A glove on her hand would at least have given the charitable a hope that she had married her lover, if it was only for the child's sake, but no, the bad quean obviously gloried in her wickedness. And silk stockings too, she'd never dream of appearing in a half-crown pair; coming here to corrupt clean-minded girls by her nasty influence, and put ideas in young heads with her repulsive sensuous body, mincing her way on the street. She would get only what she deserved when her father flung her from his door.

In just such moments ladies used to draw their skirts around them, as though they were putting a circle down to be between them and the evil which was passing; Mrs. McNulty did the best she could with what she had, even if the gesture might have been taken as an uneasiness about something coming down, and froze her face ready to deflect the glance of one of the fallen sisterhood, but Cathie's green eyes never so much as flickered their lashes as they gazed ahead. That she saw her was obvious, if only because by a half-inch of the pavement she had to walk around her, but so she might have noticed something she did not want to tread in, and shown no more sign of recognition.

The little baggage, thought Mrs. McNulty; just as they always go, eyes only for the men.

Mrs. McNulty was fond of assuring herself that her worst enemy, a fabled creature she never chased out into the day's light, could never call her something which, had it been applied, would have sounded mild beside the descriptions given of her by the most casual acquaintances or by folk who scarcely knew her socially.

"The old bitch," said Apple Johnnie, as she passed his corner on her way across to South Street. "The old corbie-crow."

"I'd give a tanner, almost, to hear what bit of carrion she'll turn up before the day's done."

"Aye, you could bet your tanner she'll do that, Donal'; if you had it."

Wattie nodded his agreement with every word of Johnnie's.

"If I were a younger man, I wouldno' do my courting within a mile of Lower Jenny's."

"No' unless you wanted the whole town to know every word you breathed."

"It would serve her right if some randy tike made it awkward for each one of her girls in their turn. Give the old poison-pot something to yatter about."

"Aye, but she'd find who it was, and then God help him. Yon would speer the hind leg off the cuddy, and then speer again, Who did it?"

"Well, she'll have a job on, from all I hear," said Alick McCracken. He had been reminded by the glimpse of Mr. Mould a few minutes earlier, that he had a titbit to offer. "Poor old Davie, I doubt he feels he has shaken the last from his quiver this time."

"The bairn's no' doing so well, they say."

"So well! It's dead, gone last night."

"Is that a fact?"

"Ah, well," said Johnnie. "Davie'll no' need to do much with his rule on a bit corpie the like of that."

"You're right, but wait till I tell you. He has sent the wire to Cathie, for her to come home."

One of his hearers at least failed to grasp the significance. "I'd give something to hear what he has to say to his proud lass, if he doesno' show her the door."

"You've small hope, Donal'. And Mr. Mould isn't the one to call her home just for that. Let Alick go on."

"Aye. It was our Isa told me; she had the bits of paper he'd scribbled the words on, out the basket. She said she wouldno' stay under the same roof with Cathie, now."

"Give me the chance! And what did you say?" said Wattie.

"I said she wasno' dead nor through the world yet, and while I'd the girls on my hands I wouldno' have one of them speak as though she were safe against the same misfortune. If I heard she had so much as looked down her nose at Cathie, I'd put her across my knee and skelp her backside."

"And it would be no bother at all!"

They ruminated on this pleasure as they watched the pattern of the Cross ever changing before them, and took advantage of the lull in the chat to spit, to relight a pipe and ease the crutch of their pants.

"If I know him, Davie I mean," said Wattie McQuart. "Instead of being thankful for having a burden lifted from him, as you might say. . . . Would you tell me, am I wrong or is that no' . . ."

"You're no' wrong, Wattie, it's herself; there's no' another red yin like Cathie in Forbye."

"Coming from the railway station on her own!"

"Imagine!"

They watched her look up the way and down, then cross on the green light. A few moments later she even had a glance for them, almost smiled, knowing who they were, before she turned again to wait for a car.

"She is kind of bonny," said Wattie.

"She has no' taken long, coming about here with her love-child, so unconcerned and quite the thing."

"They're aye the prettiest, they say. Like the wild flowers."

"I've heard that. Ah, well, Alick, maybe you're right; Cathie's no' the first, and I doubt she'll no' be the last, by a long chalk."

One snatched at the drift of the talk and leaned over towards him.

"What's all that? Are you saying it's no' her first? That's something I hadno' heard before."

"Then you'll need to keep your lugs flapping for a wee while yet, Donal', for I said nothing of the kind."

"Did you no'?"

"I did no'."

"Well, now, Wattie, but that's disappointing. They do say that she's no' married because she couldno' say who it was that bairned her."

"Donal', you've a mind like a stank. If Cathie were the besom you're making out, she'd have been married before now. I'd no' say there was bad in a lass just because she was unfortunate."

"Then she should get an order against him in the court, the same as any other. It would be more decent if folk knew who it was."

They watched her at the car stop, heedless of their comments, although she must have been aware of them. Among others waiting now she was neat and unconcerned, alone with her baby and her thoughts.

"So we may see your name in the paper yet, eh Wattie?" said Johnnie.

They laughed, before he could turn the joke on them.

"At least then you could believe what you read, while if it were either of you that they gave, I'd have no faith in the story."

Handkerchiefs were out to wipe the tears from old eyes that had seen so much in their time, and could still twinkle at vulgarity.

"Och, you canno' tell. Look at Davie Mould there."

On the far side of the Cross Davie had his office and show-room, where he kept a few of his coffins for folk to see, and cards of wooden squares stained and polished up to help in the choice. And there were bunches of everlasting flowers and plaster wreaths under glass domes in the window, always fresh and trig, a man could clap one of them on the grave and never go near it again, none of those green-slimed jam jars or rusty ape-urns with their bunch of wilted flowers. And he had blocks of grey granite with a scroll lying smooth across, as if a parchment was hidden in it and had shown when he had split them, with *Mother* in black letters that almost brought tears to the eyes; it would do any man good to set one at the old wife's head some day when he had the money in his pouch, just to show folk that it was all lies they had put around, of his breaking her heart and kicking around the pieces.

"There he is now, a wonder of a man. Spry as they're made, for all he buried my dad, and running for the car."

At the invitation they watched him.

"God Almighty!" said Apple Johnnie. "He'll no' be expecting to see Cathie there."

"It'll break him, the disgrace of it."

"Is he going to strike her? I canno' see."

"No?"

"There now! Would you look at that!"

CHAPTER II

MR. DAVID MOULD was well thought of in Forbye; he was affectionately called Davie to his face by men perhaps more prominent in the town, like the provost or Mr. Oliver Royal of the Park, but scarcely better known. For that reason the family was all the more an open target for scandal.

Girls with good taste did not flirt openly with a sister's intended, but Cathie had always gone her own way from when she was a small thing; perky as a pullet, she seemed to say to the whole street: Here I am, Cathie Mould, and if you don't like me you can leave me lay! Folk were left to shrug, and pick at the gay splendour of her hair, which had been the reason for her going into the beauty business; never her face, as Margaret lost no opportunity of telling her. Their father had time and again offered to set her up in Glassford if she would come home, but Cathie preferred to shine in a smart place down south rather than glimmer on her own in some city side-street, tinting Slobhill ladies for their losing battle. They said she was proud and headstrong, while Jimmy had been a lad worth the watching since he was cock-able, always swithering between her and Margaret, or wherever there was a bonny face; he was hard put to make up his mind. Yet Margaret had had her eye on him from the first; and she planned the wedding in the High Church in Slobhill as soon as she could get him to give her the ring which they said he had kept in his pocket all the time for Cathie until she must have taken one of her strunts, getting as near as she could to rushing him without breaking into a run, and before, as she said, the home became a nursery.

All her mind was set on a church wedding to keep up with her father's position and her groom's profession, the two carried like billiard cues in their hands with herself a spangled figure poised a toe on each, astride the gulf between, making those who watched acutely conscious of a discomfort she did not feel. And she hired the red carpet from the millinery floor of Henderson McVicar's, with the organ to coo *O perfect*

love, and after it all one of those embarrassing little scenes in the aisle, when someone from the runt of the family who could not possibly have had an invitation, leaned from the pew and blessed the bride, with tears in humble eyes but awful power in her voice.

Poor Margaret, when she had said that about the nursery she had not known the worst, or she might have abandoned it all for the minister to come quietly to the house and wed them among a few picked friends; although some said plucked would have been the better word. She'd had only the news which their mother had murmured in confidence and the whole town had known in the morning, the women repeating it to each other as they waited their turn at Ritchie's counter, that she had been caught on the change. The Lord had blessed David Mould generously in the past; he had a family grown and growing which a lesser man would have numbered with misgiving, and here he was starting another, and awful proud of the achievement from the way he spoke, though it was said he never failed to add a prayer that he might be forgiven his pride, lest perhaps it was heard above that he was taking the credit to himself.

Her more recent discovery, that there was in her romance a hint of the ridiculous, strained sisterly loyalty until it became so thin that she itched to confide in someone how Cathie had got into trouble, as this was the only way of clearing herself from the slur of having caught Jimmy on the rebound. Although he had never breathed a word about it to a soul, she believed her husband must have known at the time when he seemed to break with Cathie and, thorough gentleman that he was, had preferred folk to say for a while that she had turned him down rather than suspect how it had all been the other way around. Things whispered in the ear have a way of becoming common talk at Forbye Cross, and long before Dr. Jimmy knew of his own chivalry the town had learned how narrowly he had escaped from becoming entangled with Davie's proud beauty, the one who obviously had been allowed too much rein for her gallivanting and had now, it seemed, kicked over the traces and gone her mile.

Jimmy had been disturbed when finally she told him.
"How long have you known this?" he had asked.

"For quite a while. I have been wondering why you never mentioned it."

"Wondering what? Why on earth should I if I didn't know?"

Margaret was incredulous; this was really too absurd, even suppose he had once believed he was fond of Cathie.

"But, darling, you knew; don't pretend you thought she was any better than I expected her to be."

"What do you mean . . . I knew? How was I to know?"

And she had seen that not only was this fresh to him, but it was not at all what he wanted to hear.

"You should have told me as soon as you had known. For Cathie's sake you should have done that. Whatever is she going to do?"

"I'm surprised you ask. You ought to know Cathie has always been able to look after herself. It would be more to the point if you gave me a thought instead of wasting your sympathy on her. What is she going to do! What am I! With a shameless sister flaunting herself in the town whenever she has the fancy, dragging our name in the dirt; does she think of that?"

"She might," said Jimmy. "She might think of that. I can't say what she'll be thinking."

And he had gone through the green baize door to his consulting-room where, as she had learned in the few weeks of their married life, there were no last words.

As it heard the rumour, Forbye had held its breath. There was nothing very unusual about it; in the lower part of the town, when some couple had been unable to get a room and kitchen for themselves, no one would have thought about it. But in Flechan Street it was considered that manners were gentler; indiscretion was hidden from common folk and life's little problems were expected to be solved before being laid out in the world's eyes. It was an honoured custom among men of goodwill to fling pregnant daughters down the front steps, as if they had gotten the girls as a kind of fruit in season and it had rotted on them, instead of by badgering the life out of their poor wives, which it was common knowledge that they did. And when they were religious along with being highly moral, there was a punch and poise about the kicking which made a real job of it.

But David Mould, though one of the goody-goodies and well respected by many in the churches, was no hell-fire threatener, nor had he been known to call the wrath of God down on any living soul—he had once been heard to say that it was not his place to teach the Lord His business—and yet a man might be expected to feel less forgiving when sin of the most unpardonable and obtrusive kind came to his own door. For it was not so much that Cathie was said to be having a baby which shocked the town; it was that none could add that she had any intention of being married. And Davie never mentioned it; he was too full of his own prowess, they said.

Whether it would have been a different tale if Mrs. Mould had not been in the same way herself, the Cross was left to guess; whether his authority over his grown girls is lessened by a man's starting their mother all over again, was a discussion which needed nothing further as encouragement for them to go on talking. Folk said it was that. When his friends teased him in good nature, he shared in the laugh with them, as if he had proved himself a better man, and it was plain to any with half an eye that he was looking forward to the baby's coming. His pleasure in this one at home was more than his shame over that other away; it was the only explanation.

Cathie could remember enough of her younger sister's childhood to be sure that what her father loved was to have a toddler about the house. From Mary's day the cot had stood empty, and she could imagine well enough that his joy at the prospect of its being again brought out of the attic was far away from her own feelings about similar happenings. She had learned of her mother's confinement shortly before her own, and of his doubts that all would be as well as he had hoped; he had counted his chicks, he wrote, with too light a heart, but perhaps it was all for the best, and she was to remember that he was there to help her if she had need of him. Not much had he said, only enough for her to know what was in his mind, that two in the nursery at home would be as good a solution to her problem as any other, and it was for her to decide if she wished to solve it that way.

And then he had sent the wire. It was not Davie's way

to cloak and plot, but there was a plan open to her; if she could get home quietly there was an obvious course for her to take, even the folk who knew would in time be willing to accept things as they should be, and not search below the surface. Cathie laughed at the thought, that Forbye would ever forget, but she had come. Not by night, nor by back streets and closed cars, but she had come to the centre of the town, for them to see, and comment and remember if they wished, as well she knew they would, so that they would never be able to talk of her across the back of their hand or whisper of anything not already known to the whole Cross.

As she stepped out with the others to the car pulling up the brae, she felt a touch on her arm and the case being taken from her.

"Cathie! What a happy chance I saw you!"

"Oh, hullo, Daddy, is this you come to meet me?"

She turned to him and smiled; there was pleasure like a blink of sunshine playing around that rock of a nose on his rugged face.

He helped her on and followed, sitting beside her.

"Two penny ones, please."

The girl hurried through the lower deck, reeling off the tickets and shaking her satchel for coppers in change, and then ran up the stairs to throw back the seats ready for the terminus.

The half-filled row opposite looked at Cathie, and looked again; those on the same side leaned forward for a moment to be sure, perhaps, that it was her father with her. Against the shawl her hand lay ungloved; the light rust varnish below the white arc of the nails was warm beside the soft wool.

Of all the town it was her father who was glad to see her. Builder and undertaker, queer the way those two went together, housing for the quick and the dead, each to his need; and room enough in both for a touch of human kindness to show through the work as it did in Davie's face; through the bare things that made a face, the chin, mouth and nose, and the eyes under brows which lowered over them, gaunt and cruel you would think, like rocks on the coast, until you saw close up them twinkling as kindly as sun-warmed pools on the same shore. Yes, there was much of

the sea about him; he would yield ground if it suited him, like the tide ebbing to leave the sands open play-grounds for the children, but he could cut a man off as heartlessly as the flood if one was so foolish as to get in his way or to oppose his will. There was his voice too, like rolling sound through caverns of the sea, with light gleaming through cleft rock in the warmth of it, and dim depths where all was shadow.

A woman smiled at them and leaned across.

"Is this her out with her big sister? May I see?"

Cathie spared her just a peep; she had not looked at her father, but waited for him to correct the mistake, if he chose to do it. The woman glanced up and smiled again.

"A pet! She'll be a dark beauty. Are you not proud of her?"

"I am." And she waited until the braking of the wheels ceased and her voice could be heard by those who were listening. "It's only natural."

"And I hear you are to be married?"

Davie sat very still, as if no one was speaking at all, and looked at the pavement on the far side of the road.

"No?" said Cathie. "Do they tell you that?"

"My dear, it's no use you young people trying to keep your romances a secret in this place. They find out everything, absolutely everything."

"It's nice, isn't it, of you to be so interested."

When they left the car she noticed the woman walked back, as though she had ridden beyond her stop.

"There is nothing hid," said Davie.

"But you knew that when you sent for me."

"I did. And I figured we should be gaining more than we should lose, so do not let that be a worry to you, Cathie. As far as the past is concerned, I'm saying nothing. My hope now is that we can make ourselves happy among things as they are."

She smiled, although she did not look at him; darkened lashes hid her lowered eyes.

"That's how you have always punished us; made us feel terrible because we knew you would never scold. Daddy, you know I'm not a very bad woman?"

David Mould, the missionary, did not smile; he patted her arm as they turned in at the open gates of the house.

"That is my hope; but suppose you are, isn't it my duty to save you?"

"Then will you tell Mother I've promised to be good?"

The front steps were freshly washed, bringing up the colours in the patterned tiles, and the edges still gleamed white, scarcely marked by the few feet climbing them that day. Davie put his latch key into the brazen eye of the heavy glass door, and she was home.

"We'll find her now; she'll be upstairs."

She followed him to the cosier sitting-room they used now the family was few, and stood in the doorway when she saw her mother by the fire, and thought it would have been more fitting if she had been in her bed. The fact was, she was scarcely out of it, and not able to be about the house, but had given herself a mending job to do, darning socks.

"You see what I found at the Cross, Jessie. I tell you, I'm never back without something."

As they came in she had looked up, and very slowly she drew the length of wool after her needle, with her left hand frozen inside the heel, as if she had forgotten how she had it held.

"Why, Cathie! I had never thought to see you!"

"Yes, Mother, the bold bad Cathie, with her bundle."

"Shush, don't joke; I have not the strength to scold you, God forgive me."

Catherine crossed the room and laid her baby on her mother's knee. The movement of the car had soothed her and she had slept, but now she stirred and cried hungrily. Jessie made a lap of her broad thighs and settled her there, turning down the shawl to see better what she had.

"Ah, the bonny wee soul! I hope neither of you imagine that she's going to take the place of my own? I may forgive you in time, Cathie, if I find you have brought home a pretty baby; though not so quickly as I know your father will. Oh, but what a darling! Now, if I seem to be letting you off just at this moment, don't you imagine I'm not very angry with you."

"Mother, I assure you . . ." Cathie had dropped to her heels beside the chair, and was looking at her baby as Jessie busied herself with the clothes.

"Get me my nursing apron then, and I'll teach you how

to look after her. Don't think I'm going to do it all for you; I've done my share. There are nappies in the linen cupboard, but they had better go by the fire. The poor mite is starved."

They did as she bade them, and then watched as she nursed the baby at her breast.

She seemed to have forgotten them.

"Ah, my do'e!" she was saying. "My wee cushat-do'e."

Dr. Jimmy Muirburn let his car roll itself to a standstill outside his house in Slobhill. He pulled on the handbrake, notch by notch, clicking until it was set; for a moment the engine ran steady and then as his toe touched down the throttle and he switched off, it hurriedly sighed itself to sleep. He did not get out immediately, but sat thinking of Cathie as he had seen her down at the Cross, and of the decision he intended to force himself to make once he was indoors.

The poor kid; he must have been love-crazy that night. Not crazy in the same way as over Margaret, so that the blood pounded through his body, and set his throat afire, if it had been like that he could have excused himself; but merely daft to make a bid for her, to try by that to keep her for himself, a dog in the manger wooing and nothing less. At least there could be no more of that; the danger would be over with Cathie hating him, as she surely did . . . less than the dust, that was James Muirburn now. She'd think him a cad, and so he was; but not cad enough to deny that he had enjoyed his caddishness. It was a hampering thing, to be tied to one's conscience and be always mindful of responsibilities; a man should be able to lay his integrity on the shelf for half an hour or hang it up with his hat in the hall, ready to lift again on the way out and be as good as ever after a brush on the sleeve. It was a pity one had to drag oneself around all through life, and be answerable for every mortal thing one did, never to slip away from consequences for a moment unknown in some fold of time. If only it could be as easy as that. But there was this baby; Cathie's, that at least was definite, and from what he knew of her, most likely his own; he could ask Margaret to take it in as theirs, if only his conscience was not so tender. Folk would talk; not that he cared much what the town said, only for this once he had been fool enough to let them be right; and she would begin

to wonder, she would be doing that soon enough already. Perhaps if old Davie was to take it in, that would be more fair to the wean, and easier all around.

He slammed the car shut and then his own front door, two slams which told the world outside and in that he was back. It had done no good, sitting there to think; that was the great mistake, to stop now and again to think; either do it always and without fail or never at all. There was feint the good in comforting Cathie's lonesomeness only in the way it suited him, and then leaving her to carry the can while he was off, patching up diseased bodies, imagining himself as the beloved physician; a poor humanitarian he was if he turned his back on a child lest folk should say it was his own.

"Margaret, your sister's home!"

"Not Cathie?"

"Aye, Cathie! I saw her at the Cross, complete with bundle, and I dare say a spare nappy in her case."

"Do you mean she has brought it here? Jimmy, oh, how could she!"

"I think she is quite right; you don't have to pay rail fare while they are under three."

"Don't be ridiculous, you know what I mean. What am I to do, while she is walking about the town with her come-by-chance?"

Jimmy shrugged; the answer was beyond him.

"Stop me and buy one."

And he laughed; he seemed to find his joke much funnier than she did. The trouble with him was that sometimes he would forget he was the doctor; and with her, that she never forgot she was the doctor's wife.

"You say you saw her at the Cross; were you speaking to her?"

"What do you think? That I pulled up the surgery window and called coo-ee?"

"Oh, thank heaven you were in there."

She was relieved that no irreparable damage had been done so far; Jimmy was so impulsive, it would have been quite like him to have lifted her in the car and run her home.

"But I can't stay there for life; so make up your mind what the official family attitude is going to be, before I go to the house to-morrow."

Margaret pulled the cosy over the teapot as though she were smothering it.

"Now, Jimmy, don't be awkward. You know very well what the others are going to do . . . precisely nothing. Cathie is to be allowed to come and go just as she pleases; if she brings an odd wean or two it is regrettable but there's no more to it. Quite obviously Daddy regards her as a throw-back to the more homely ways of his forebears, and even his social position must suffer rather than he should bring himself to ostracise her. I have always said she was spoilt; he used to sit twisting a finger in her hair as though it fascinated him, and now she does the twisting. But that is no reason why I should revert, and drag you down with the family you married into."

The abyss she was showing him did not seem to be putting him off his tea.

"Come on, Margaret; we're not so high-stepping as all that. What seems right to dear old Davie is good enough for me. What are you suggesting, that we drop her!"

"You put it very crudely."

"It's a crude subject."

"I'm thinking of you, and your future in the town."

"Well, it is Cathie's which is more immediate, so suppose we think of that. I was always glad enough to run around with her; when you were not being too come-hither, she used to take pity on me; and folk would remember it too, if I were to cut her now. Apart from all that, it would be such a shabby thing to do that only bad luck could follow it."

All of that was true, though she would rather he did not remind her of it; at the same time, she liked to be assured of Jimmy's loyalty. It was one thing for her to cast off her own sister, but it would have been very different if her husband had suggested it. A family and a tradition were what Margaret strove after, only it was to be of her own design. And she did not like to be reminded that it was Cathie who had first attracted Jimmy.

"A pity almost that you did not marry her; it would have saved all this."

She did not like the look he gave her; the same thought might have occurred to him.

"It might have done, if she would have had me."

"Don't sound so regretful; did you ask her?"

"Oh, shut up; it was you I was in love with."

It did not escape her that he had not answered. She knew well enough there were limits to her conquest as Mrs. Muirburn, and she was wise not to push beyond them.

"As a matter of fact," he was saying . . . his way of stating something he considered to be highly improbable. "The happiest solution would be for us to adopt Cathie's baby; it's done in most families."

"We are not living in the Spoutmouth."

"Is that any reason why we shouldn't be decent?"

"People would talk. Knowing how you carried on if she gave you the least encouragement, even if it was only in fun; they might get quite the wrong impression."

"Oh, by all means let us keep our name untarnished and shiny before men!"

What was there worth preserving in a good name that needed so harsh a pickle? A thin substanceless thing to hand on to his children, wrapped in false charity and held together by callousness.

"Of course, if you do not mind what would be said. . . ."

"I'd be flattered."

Jimmy was incorrigible; she had long given up hope of ever weaning him from ribaldry.

"And you know I would not. Yet don't let a little thing like that put you off making the noble gesture, if you're set on it."

"Oh, don't worry; I shan't be in too big a hurry. It was just an idea, and I wondered how you felt about it. So long as I know you are not putting your foot down."

Margaret believed that her weakness with Jimmy when he wanted his way would never let her baulk him; guide and deflect, even sometimes she would hold him back, but never openly oppose him. In this idea she felt she could manage him well enough, without letting him see how objectionable its mere suggestion was to her; she disliked the very thought of it so intensely that it was quite a while before she realised it had not occurred to either of them that Cathie herself might have had plenty to say.

CHAPTER III

CATHIE, in her room, was preparing herself for trial by ordeal; she was going through the town for the day's shopping, as she had done on the first morning of any return home. She would have felt better if she had been able to dress for the occasion, but the threat of rain made anything save an oilskin appear fool-hardy, and the note for the day would need to be practical responsibility. She looked at her glass, to see if she would do, and to delay the moment of leaving the shelter of the house.

The oiled silk was almost grey over the coat and skirt, the upturned collar made her hair more golden against its brown velvet; she wondered about covering it. Not unless it rained heavily, and she slipped a snood into her pocket against that happening; folk knew her by her hair, and she would go in among them showing it, like an army with banners. She put nothing on her face, so the rain could beat on it all day and it would not matter, only a touch to flame her lips, clearing the already clear skin. Her reflection was unforgivably herself, Cathie as Forbye had always known her, cheerful and pleasant, with nothing of the lush beauty of a fallen woman. The sin in the eyes of the town was not so much in falling, but in appearing to fall on your feet, and her self-critical eye decided that she looked the same as ever, just as if she had stayed put.

It was a relief to know that she could not afford herself too long a holiday; the best course for them all she had decided would be to show her face, be quietly impervious to any snubs and displeasure, and go away until Forbye had been given time enough to accept the situation.

Mary came in, buckling her raincoat.

"Mother says I can do the messages with you. And we could go to see Margaret."

"Perhaps Margaret won't be pleased to see me."

"She's pleased with everything, now Jimmy has married her; Wattie said she was scared one time that you would get him."

"Wattie said that?"

"Aye, he did. And Apple Johnnie said so you could have had him, if you'd lifted your pinkie."

"The old blethers."

"Even Isa says you were too choosey by a half."

Cathie had avoided Isa and other help in the house; in the few contacts so far, she was made conscious that a strong belief was held there that virtue was its own reward, and they were loaded with it.

"And what do you think yourself?"

"Oh, I suppose they'd say I'm too young to know, but it would have been a pity to upset poor Margaret when she wanted so badly to be a doctor's wife."

"Who did your hair this morning?" asked Cathie.

"I did. Mother's too busy with your baby."

She untied the ribbons and put her brush through the heavy ripples, bringing up the smoky red, so much deeper and more hidden than her own.

"You know it's an awful thing to do, Mary, coming home with a baby and no husband!"

Main Street was stretched out of the road that snaked into the town and on again through a cobrigration of ironworks, came up twice for air and then went down for the third and last time into the city depths of Glassford. Down its whole length, with the tram standards on each side crowding in the smoky distance until they looked like bars, wire netting the top, children ran for their chips, like mice in a cage, and peered over the frosted glass of the friers', red tumble-scarred knees pulled to make the height, on tip-toes in handed-down boots. They larked in the entrance of the cinema, that memorial to fine flour, arguing over the more attractive points of the stars baiting the box office and being chased by the commissioner just as soon as he could be sure they were not going in to fill the cheaper seats or to join the Millers' Mutual Matinée Movement. Almost splendid he was in his regimentals; green as jealousy, they had been made on the big side and he wasn't quite the man to fit them.

And so many children; the schools were built wide and handsome, and they were packed in, fifty or more to a class,

until education became mass production of no one knew quite what, and if folk had not been told that they were getting the finest in the world they would never have put up with it. And after school they thronged the streets, playing while there was light to see; they were under the cars at last-across-the-road, drowning themselves in water tanks, crushed by collapsing walls and lost down unexpected subsidences, flung off the step of the bus and knocked into the arms of Jesus by the royal mail vans, but still the streets re-echoed to their shouts, their songs and their laughter.

*A ring-a ring-a ro-ses, a copper copper shell
My dog's a-wa' to Ham-ilton to get a new bell.*

Wherever there was a dry pavement it was chalked out for peever, *BOX* at each end, and the walls with skewered hearts announced *M.M. loves J.G.*, the shins of passers-by were whipped among the peeries, and the frayed knots in the ca'ing ropes fetched you a clout as the line of skippers ran around, turn by turn.

*My wee Sue
All in blue
Died last night at ha'past two.*

Right enough it was the place for bairns, they were everywhere as though someone had couped a pint of fleas. They said in Forbye that the rich would get power by getting richer while the poor stayed poor begetting children; one more or less in a family was surely neither here nor there, it was a wonder folk had the time to notice it the way they did . . . they had little to do!

They were in Ritchie's, the grocery, when Margaret entered the shop; Cathie was in among the folk and they did not see each other until Mary had spoken, and all the lot turned to watch, remembered themselves and half-turned to their own business again.

"Cathie! I did hear you were home, but I haven't had a chance to get down."

"Only since yesterday afternoon. How well you look, and I do like your hat."

"This one? It was just a thing I got the other day; twelve and eleven."

Margaret lied with charm and without expecting you to believe her. She voiced each word carefully from a sweet smooth throat and trilled her liquids only when she was excited, most times she kept them thin and refined, and a bit awkward in the sing-song of Forbye, like rosewood chairs in a too small drawing-room, for her voice should have come generously from her wide mouth. To-day she was all smile, pert nose and merry eyes.

"You seem to get the best of everything for a song, don't you? How is the husband?"

Everything that had conquered over tartar and dinginess was vindicated in Margaret's smile; it flashed like the white cliffs of Dover.

"Jimmy will be dying to see you; if you do not meet him in the town, I'll send him around."

Cathie did not answer; she felt she was expected to be rather grateful.

"I'll send them along," said Ritchie. "This afternoon. Good-day. And you, Mrs. Muirburn?"

"My sister was first; and I expect she is in a hurry to get back."

He turned to her.

"Yes, Miss Cathie? And how is the family to-day?"

"We are all well thank you."

There was nothing in her voice, as she heard it over her beating heart, to tell that she had been hit by the first stone.

In Forbye it did not matter where you had a story from, nor how many times; it was never the same twice. That had always been the way; unless you were there at the time yourself, it was wiser just to listen, and believe nothing you had not seen. The place was all eyes; they had seen everything and could describe it to you until you wanted the details, and then the picture blurred; they had just been too late to be sure of one thing or they had been by just a moment

before another, but they had had it all from Ritchie the grocery.

Ritchie was an expert witness; he could have told a lie which would hang you while believing it to be the truth. Every morning he shut his shop and went down the street for a shave, and all the events of the day were timed by providence to fit in with the arrangement. There was not an accident at the Cross but Ritchie was there, nor a cat run over but he could tell how she had been cut to pieces and the car rails ran with blood. If death had a hand in it, so much the more excitement; he was a great publicity man for death and gave out the obituaries with a glee belying his usual comment, and any he missed he mugged up in the *Fugleman* and trotted out as a bonus on Saturday mornings.

"Aye, it's awful sad."

With Ritchie being in respectable trade, and a churchman, and folk buttering him up to get what they wanted sent around in a hurry, he was the very pin-point centre of public opinion; hear Ritchie, and you had taken a cross section of responsible elements in the town and no need for a gallup poll. Listening to Apple Johnnie talking, or to Alick McCracken, was good enough for one side of a picture, but Ritchie waited on the big houses and spoke to the provost's wife and old Mrs. Royal and to all the other ladies, they came in specially to tell him their views, you were to understand; besides, he was getting the feelings of all the better-class traders in the course of his day's business.

So that if it was a happening of any moment in Forbye, you could be sure that the account you had in the grocery on a Saturday morning would have come from the right quarters, while Johnnie's would be one of his own, gathered as he moved homewards on the Friday night, in well deformed circles. Ritchie would tell you from behind one of his six foot counters, where you would find him reading the week's *Fugleman* by the light coming through his shop window and by the goods which stocked it, amid smells of wooden boxes and treacle, bacon, coffee and of the spirits permeating everything, the one thing alone which seemed to have preserved the old man, and some said, in spite most likely for you had never noticed, the smell of cats.

It was well-nigh agony for Ritchie to spend a day without

opening his door; a holiday was punishment to him, and the one time when he had been known to enjoy a shut-day lived in his memory.

"I mind a Wednesday," he would tell you. "It was the fair week. I took the bus to . . . I forget just where it was . . . but I changed there on to the other route. I walked straight from one bus into the other and was home in time for my dinner. It made a grand tour."

It was the getting home for his dinner had made the day. For a small man Ritchie was great at stuffing his tripes, but a meal out was no meal at all; it had to be at his own table, with something taken to it, a bit of fish or some fried ham, and then for all he cared the travellers could keep their first lunch, the last supper or the thirty-second breakfast.

The shop was his world, a small dark place, low and green-painted with dormer windows poking out of the slates like a snail's eyes, straining to see all they could but ready to shrink in again if you were to reach up and touch them. It had shouldered itself between a couple of three-storied houses that overtopped it, like a little old woman getting to the front of the crowd, and the two show windows were full of warped display dummies and fly-spotted advertisements for biscuits, and their backing was just high enough to stop you from looking in behind the counters, and just low enough for old Ritchie to poke his long thrapple out of his collar as he lifted his spectacled eyes to keek out on the street, like the minister scenting peppermint in the kirk. One side was lined with tea caddies decorated with Chinese characters, and across the saw-dusty floor the other with brass-bound spirit barrels; so you took your choice, either turning your back on the tea or whisky, while he fussed out of the gloom in the rear of the shop and served you.

And it was from there that the well thought on folk of Forbye had in their drams. No slobbering in the spirit shop or rolling up the road for them, singing *Jesus wants me* at seven in the evening or *I dream of Jeannie* at the back of ten.

"That's a good tune."

"Aye."

"And she's a good lass."

"Oh, aye."

"Puts me in mind of Davie's."

"Aye. Did you hear me whistle?"

"Aye."

"And did you no' like it?"

"I've heard worse."

"Then together, boys. . . ."

I dream of Jeannie with the light brown hair. . . .

In Forbye they drank their beer as an afterthought, a half and a half, to chase the spirits through them, and sold it in a score of shops, one to every church, with faded name boards across the front and the merchant's in thin sketchy strokes where it would least be seen, as if it were there only because it must be, so let the rain cover it as soon as it will then everything can be decent and respectable again. They did not go through those doors unless they were in a bunch and not caring what folk thought, or were rough, no-account stock from the old town so that no one expected any different. Inside you just ordered and drank, a glass of the special, with three fingers laid on the edge of the bar, then the others would not know that you were down to the Johnnie Jump-up, it looked the same as theirs but for the threepence it knocked the back out of your head, and then you drank again or came away. Not much talk or play in these shops, there was room only for the two lines, those who were ordering and the drinkers against the wall; if you were not doing either you could get out and make room for another. And if a man spoke to you he would be a stranger, English no doubt and given to talking at his drink; you just said, Aye, and Aye again, and left it at that, or he would be offering you a beer in the next few minutes and bringing every eye in the place on you.

Folk from the grey fronted houses in Flechan Street and other nice parts of the town did not go in gulping shandies and chasers at the bars; they ordered it with the weekly groceries and had it sent around decently to their door. It came along in Ritchie's baskets, wrapped in brown paper and tied with white string, or perhaps in neatly divisioned boxes labelled *Invalid Port*, and you drank it when you liked in the room at the back, just like the big house itself, and the empties went away to the basement and never told a soul. Some houses of course had not the gentle ways; maybe they

had a yard at the back and it would be so choked up that no one could have found a corner if he had nipped in there at night, and sometimes when the old folk were gone and a daughter-in-law moved in she would have it all cleared out, for fear of what folk would think, enough bottles and more to stock a shebeen.

To see a yard being turned out was a sure sign of an incomer, following a death in the house. And death was the only thing that could get you a house, and even then you had to be quick or in with the funeral furnisher; if you were not around at about the time they put the pennies on you need not bother, for someone else would be there before and have taken the place. The yard would be cleared then, quickly before the litter could be mistaken for yours; some folk thought it funny that the coffin and its clay should be humphed out of the front door, and the children stopping play and standing about to see it into the hearse, while the empty bottles were being taken away from the back, but there were always minds coarse enough to laugh at anything. Folk wanted space for any of their own that might collect; you knew how it was, although you could not bear the stuff and never took a drop unless to ward off a chill, the bottles seemed to gather. It was a very good thing no one ever came round the backs on Flechan Street, or you would not know what might be thought; but there it was nobody's business. You could clean your front windows on a Friday, and red up the step and burnish the brass plate on the door, keeping the place presentable, knowing that behind the dark gleam of the curtained glass and up the wilton on the stairs when the door was opened to the street, there was your own life and none but you yourself need ever know about it.

The houses themselves were not ones to give away their secrets. They drew together in rows to make a screen along one side of the street, and on the other stood aloof in their own grounds, their faces drawn up tight and absorbed in their own sufficiency, like folk who wouldn't see their own brother across the way for fear he was wanting something off them. They had the curtains draped to balance on each side of the windows, and the blinds drawn down fifteen inches on every sash, and not a half-inch allowed to come or go; you wondered how they could bring themselves to do it to have the expense

of all that glass and then not use it; they must be well-off folk for it to mean nothing to them. And the furniture polish used in the front room told the same, and china displayed in cabinets and lace to take the rub of the minister's collar off the chair, and mirrors reflecting darkly on what was in the room, with one set cannily to show who passed along the pavement to those who did not want to sit behind the lace vulgarly staring out on the street.

In the front it was rhododendrons and respectability; the one did flower half-heartedly for an hour or two but the other had not even that much life and none of the colour. And the back of the little houses no one ever saw, unless it was the bin men and the coal or someone on the railway, and you would not count them. Folk never knew of the broken steps, of the crumbling bricks of the wash-houses with the old suds rotting the heavy tubs, of the pile of stone and slate where the old privies had been and of the green mould on the undug plots which had had no dung since the houses were plumbed. From the street you would never think that there might be no bath in there and folk washed in the back-kitchen sink—it was fine and handy for a dight up and didn't take you away from the talk—or perhaps a bath and basin but with *Hot* taps that had never been wedged to a pipe; or ever guess that the stank was nearly through and had red drops of rust creeping on it and gave a stench that nearly made you vomit each time a cistern flushed. No, you could not see any of this when the front door was answered; the house hung on close to its secrets and the folk who came to the door could look after their own.

And some would not even come. There was the old doiterer who peered scarie-eyed from the window whenever a step sounded on the ill-kept path, to see who could be chapping at his door; likely it was the milk or the newspaper girl or the kindly body who went each day to do for him, as she had done all the years since his shrew of a wife died and left him the house and the first peace he had ever had in it. He would never open until he had seen who was there; frightened lest it was her back, they said, as if he had never quite believed in his good fortune. A gentle harmless soul, he stayed in all day reading his books and peering from the shadows; in the dusk he walked muttering to himself and scaring the children

until they threw stones after him; they said he was answering her back, getting out of his system the pent-up bitterness of the years when she had threeped and threeped at him and he had never given her a cross word. Many a time he must have rued the day when he married a woman with a little property of her own, for she had never let him forget it; her house, her carpets, her sticks of furniture, even her poor health, she hung on to them all and kept him pluttering about to clean the windows, and wash the damp step in the early morning before the neighbours were about, and deal with the weeds on the front patch inside the gate, and switch down the stairs, and go for her messages; it was no life for any man, but even when the poor health came up as his best friend at the last, he was not mean with her memorial, but ordered a fine granite boulder to be put on her head with a beautiful polished inset and words about the peace which passeth all understanding. For in the end he had peace enough, the house to himself and quietness undisturbed, though not so quiet as that narrow house of hers now six feet underground. It was the peace of desistance.

"May the doctor come in?"

Jimmy's call sounded behind the bang of the front door. In the mirror over the side-board Cathie saw him pause in the hall, adjusting his tie for a moment, until he saw her watching.

"Coo-ee, Cathie!"

She did not turn; very busy picking out the silver for the table, she hoped he would go up the stairs to her mother.

"Say something, if it's only ninety-nine."

It was easy enough to hate the very thought of him while she was away; this was the time to do the hating, and here she was making a mighty poor job of it.

"If I start to say things about you, James Muirburn, you'll be the sorry man."

"I was afraid of that."

"A bit late with your fears, are you not? A pity you don't carry them with you when you go on holiday."

Much of all she had saved for him had escaped her in the

emotion of confronting him, but it was coming back; in narrows strips she would eventually flay him.

"Go on, Cathie; you'll feel better when you've got it out of your system."

"You're the boy to talk. You don't have to go down the street with the shoes on the pavement tittering, Scarlet harlot! Scarlet harlot! Scarlet harlot!"

And she minced across the parquet flooring with her heels beating the rhythm.

"If you had only let me know, or given me half a chance to make it right."

"Make it right! The whole college of surgeons couldn't do that."

"True, but I meant I would have broken off with Margaret; she would want rid of me in any case, if she gets to know."

"Very likely; only don't flatter yourself . . . why should I want you? I've had enough without that, and the talk it would make in the town. Doctor's bride in a cloak; honeymoon in maternity home. Thank you for nothing."

He fidgeted with the things by the table mats; and looked again at her as she leaned on the back of the high carving chair.

"You are very bitter, Cathie. I'll talk to you another time."

"You will keep your mouth shut; if there is any talking, I'm doing it."

"How much have you done?"

"None. And you are not to start it."

"I see,"—and she was doing her best to show him—"when it suits you, you are going to have the time of your life. Ah, well, I suppose I have deserved it. Go right ahead, castigate me."

"It's not that you need!"

She picked up the carvers. Jimmy laughed quietly.

"You still have your sense of humour, anyway."

She did not answer, and there was a silence between them. Lately she had thought less than nothing of the fates' idea of fun; there was too much pawkiness about it, sadism almost; they did queer things with you for no other reason than to make suffering. If they had Jimmy earmarked for Margaret, they ought to have made him so that he could leave her alone,

or her to feel differently about him. And she could not put every blame on him without making herself out to be a spineless creature devoid of character. Better perhaps to have some of it bad, than to have none at all.

"Have you no patients in this house, Dr. Muirburn?"

"All right. May I see my child?"

"You will if you go up to Mother. But if you say one word, I'll never forgive you; as it is, it'll be long enough before I do, so don't go chucking good lives after bad. This has not been easy for them."

Tomorrow she was going; by this time of evening she would have left it all behind. Cathie felt as if she had been through an examination; now it was over and whether she had passed or failed miserably there was nothing for the moment that could be done about it.

It was true that she had not wanted to marry Jimmy Muirburn; she would not have taken him as a gift, either from Margaret, or if it had happened that he had no other tie, from his mother. Somewhere she had heard that a gentleman did not seduce the woman he loved; she knew nothing of that. It would depend so much on the standard of your gentleman, the depth of love and how ready you were to be seduced. Catherine did not delude herself with the excuse of being betrayed; she blamed him more for allowing her to make a fool of herself than for fooling her. All the details as she remembered them were so commonplace and even tawdry, uninteresting and certainly without glamour, and with no one but Jimmy would there have been any consequences warranting them a second thought.

He had been on holiday and had come to find her and give her a good time; as Margaret's sister, apart from being herself, she accepted it as a right. And because he was handsome, good company and could make her feel she was a girl worth being seen with, they had had it.

It was not the first time she had been driven out of town and suppered at a roadhouse, or drunk more gins and lime than Davie would have liked, which would not have been difficult nor taxed a thimble's capacity. Neither was it the first time on a warm night in a fine car that a man had made love to

her. But it was the very first time that all of these had gone out of control. For long enough Jimmy had flirted with her at every chance, until even the family could no longer be outraged; for long enough she had regarded him as almost her property, something she was graciously handing to Margaret, as she herself had received Margaret's cast-offs as a child, frocks bought for the one which clashed and jangled on the nerves when they were worn against the titian colouring of the other, until the fact that he was within weeks of becoming her good-brother seemed to have tumbled her defences, even suppose she had realised there had been the need to man them. She could in fairness blame him no more than herself for taking that last drink, for stopping the car where they seemed to have the world to themselves, where willows sighed for love and beckoned to the west wind. Nor for losing her own good sense just because all else seemed gracious, nature kindly and beneficent. Yet since then, even in her determination to take what must come, the bitter blame she had for herself was loaded equally at least on him, and in the struggle to retain her own self-respect she had no effort left to keep one shred of her old feelings for him.

Curiously, although she spared herself nothing of what she knew must be said about her, nor of what more would be said if Forbye ever came to know, she wondered why never had she felt that she had been disloyal to Margaret. It would be different now, after he had been married; although she knew in the essentials there was no excuse, neither would Margaret find her any. Once when they were children Margaret had been taken for a treat while Cathie had been left at home, perhaps a cold in the head had been the forgotten cause of the distinction or it may have been a punishment; whatever it was, she supposed now they would be quits.

Cathie laughed, dandling her trouble on her knees before the nursery fire. She had heard many strange reasons for these misfortunes, from being frightened by a mouse or being kissed by a stranger in the pictures to the one that it was blasphemous to recall, but never of blaming it on a childish disappointment.

"You fidget her, Cathie; keep your knees still."

"Sorry, Mother. You see, I'm all apologies this weather. There, I'll give young Cathie to you . . . my shame and my

joy. I'm sure you'll make her a far better mother than I would."

She took her carefully to her mother, and remained for a moment gazing at them both.

"She is rather sweet; such a pity to have folk telling her she was born in sin, when sin is about the last thing she looks like."

"It's late to remember that. All we can do now is to rear her in love, and hope it will help."

Very few folk ever saw tears in Cathie's eyes; green and cold, they said they were; but Jessie knew when tears were in her voice, and when her lips trembled as they kissed her cheek.

CHAPTER IV

IN the Mould family they had always said that when she chose Margaret's tongue was sharp enough to cut the water off; if her nature had been one half as nippy as anyone listening to her might have taken it to be, then it was going to be a poor look-out for her husband. Often her self-righteous outbursts threatened a great deal more than ever materialised, not because she was inclined to change her opinion, but rather because some other thing had taken up a larger share of her attention or by looking around the subject of her displeasure she saw that everything was not in shadow.

The elder girls had done their share of pram pushing, so perhaps the habit of going with one down the town was acquired and too fixed to be easily broken. Or it might have been that with her the hall-mark of the better-class residential district was a luxury pram and a well-kept baby of the delightful kind that attracted every eye; although the fact that she could not resist talking, and talking intelligently by infant standards, which she believed were definitely high, to any lively baby, suppose it were in a carriage, shawl or soap-box it did not seem to matter, suggested that while the snob appeal was answered in her, the child had the first call. If Catherine's baby had been the raucous red-headed little bastard she had pictured, Margaret might not have cared how finely it rode; as it happened, she admitted to herself if to no one else that this dark child with the merry confident eyes was worth every scrap of the love that was poured over her in the home on Flechan Street, and would have been a credit to any, no matter how she was come by. Her hands fairly itched until she had them happily around the handle and was away down Main Street, a ready-made mother.

Many of the miners around Forbye would have stayed indoors rather than be seen out walking with no dog, a man feels so daft without something at his heels; right through the town the women seemed the same about their prams. They felt as though they had a grip on solid things when

they walked behind one, and a sense of confidence akin to the well-being there was in putting on over the house frocks the all-concealing and prosperous fur coats.

"It broke the line," as Mrs. McNulty had said.

And knowing all this, Margaret belted her waist until it was so slim that it made no difference, and pushed young Cathie around the shops, and up and down to Flechan Street, thoroughly enjoying her spurious motherhood and feeling that for a time at least she had the laugh of the town; she had her cake and was eating it too.

"Not yours, surely, Mrs. Muirburn? You quite surprised me!" Mrs. McNulty had said, with very little face behind her teeth.

"Yes, ours." Margaret's smile would have charmed cream to rise on the milk. "We have always been a large family, and a large family has so much more room for surprises; do you not agree?"

She had astonished even herself at the number of inaccuracies she could convey in a few words; those were days she had enjoyed, and sometimes she was even sorry for Cathie, that it was her pleasure which she was enjoying, that while her sister took all the kicks she was around gathering the ha'pence. And once or twice, with the more contented side of her nature coming uppermost, she found herself dangerously near to forgiving Cathie her trespasses, never for one moment suspecting that those same trespasses were against her.

Accustomed to seeing the doctor's wife about with a pram, Forbye accepted the Muirburns' own baby almost casually, as if it were no more than second thoughts. They gave her very little of the attention that is usually lavished on the first, for the encouragement of the new mother, and Margaret might just as well have been going about merely with the latest, it was taken as such a matter of course. If she had not been so pleased with herself she might have felt a slight, or realised that what she had had of Cathie's would not come again to her in her own right; as it happened it was some while later that she first had a vague sense of re-enacting something which she had done before, and then of the sug-

gestion of boredom which folk showed when politeness demanded that they should look into her pram.

The truth was that the sisters' two children, apart from young Cathie being the elder, if not as alike as peas in the same pod, showed as much resemblance to each other as two from pods off the same stock.

Mrs. McNulty, torn between examining the doctor's child, the pram and cataloguing all the furnishings, and hearing what was going down on his wife's grocery order, decided on first things first and followed Margaret into the shop.

"They always do say it is smittle, Mrs. Muirburn. As soon as ever I saw you pushing your mother's pram I said to myself that now it would not be long."

Margaret knew that for Mrs. McNulty to say anything to herself meant she had already exhausted every other source of listeners. And she thought of remarking that it had been slow working on her, since she could remember pushing Mary not so long ago, and some of the others before her, but it might have laid open the ground for a dig at Cathie; not that she was sensitive for her sister, but no one was to stick pins into Cathie as a substitute, a kind of wax-doll means of goading her.

"Dear Mrs. McNulty! You take such an interest in us. I cannot think how you find the time."

"But it is we busy folk who get around. There's the doctor, is he ever at home? It is a wonder to me he has managed to start a family of his own!"

"I know. Really, I might as well be without a husband for all I see of him. As I told him . . ." Margaret lowered her voice decently ". . . after I had been pushing the family pram about, if something did not happen soon it would need to be cycling next, and if all else failed I should have to get one sent along with the groceries."

"Never mind, you have done very nicely, I'm sure."

Ritchie cleared his throat, walked around the end of his counter and spat towards the gutter; Margaret suspected that Slobhill was coming under cross-fire.

"Aye, Mrs. Muirburn, 'sawful cold the day."

She gave him the order, those things that had been forgotten when the young man who waited upon families daily had arrived at her backdoor.

"They will be up this afternoon with the usual," he said, with great sense of the confidence resting in him, like a stage solicitor. And then, business getting the better of him, he reached beneath the counter and brought up a brown bottle for her inspection. "A very good sherry that; I was thinking you might like a half-dozen."

This was one of those moments when Margaret knew her education was letting her down; she read through the label a second time without recalling anything she had come across in the wide illustrated journals that told in articles of simple language just how things were done in the best homes. Beyond a conviction that sherry should be dry and perhaps nutty, she could remember nothing worth mentioning in the hope of impressing Mrs. McNulty.

"A very pleasant dessert wine," said Ritchie, and he looked out of his window; it was all one to him. "I believe the doctor will like it; soft and generous."

"I can but try it; it makes it difficult when he is so particular."

Mrs. McNulty's nod implied that her man was the same, would not put his lip to any but the best until she had taught him that all wine was a mocker.

"Left to myself I would never touch it; as it is, I only take a drop now and then for the sake of the company."

Another understanding nod; the thoroughly nice girl among her husband's rather wild rich set.

"It is a pity more are not like you." After a pause to mark the change of subject, she asked, "Have you any news of your sister Catherine?"

"Why, yes. I believe it was the day before yesterday, we heard that she is after a place very much nearer home. If she takes it, of course we shall be seeing quite a lot of her."

"I am glad," said Mrs. McNulty. "Without wanting to recall painful mistakes, it will be so much less anxiety for your parents, to have her closer to home influence."

The slightest of shrugs by Margaret's shoulders conveyed everything; after all, she could not judge her sister, although she realised others must.

"But I think by now everyone has forgotten; my worst enemy can never accuse me of a long memory for things like that. And your parents have been most sympathetic."

Their voices were soft and generous over the pram, women's voices discussing another less fortunate, where fortune ran hand in hand with virtue.

"I must have one peep at your treasure before I let you go. Ah, the sweet! She does not take after you, does she? Nor after your husband, really. Now, who does she remind me of? Her little cousin, surely! Would you look at that, is that not interesting!"

From one single meeting with the doctor's wife Mrs. McNulty felt she had gathered quite a load of material. To start with there was the news of Cathie coming home, a happening which past experience showed could be an affront to the whole town, and curiosity would never rest until she could find why the girl had left her work in the south, if it was as lucrative as they said, and whether the folk at this new place were aware of the kind of young woman they were taking on. Very often in these changes about the country there was more at the back than was at first apparent; it was never wise to accept anything without looking into it. Then there had been the titbit of the Muirburn sherry; it had been a pity that old Ritchie had spoken cautiously of the usual without giving a hint of what it might have been, because it would have been worth knowing whether they were taking more than on the last occasion when she had seen the boy at their gate and she had asked him if the ham was any less salt that week, on purpose to take a peep into his basket. It only showed how careful folk would need to be, with the doctor already hand in glove with his wife's father the undertaker; no one valuing his life would call out Dr. Muirburn during the early hours of the morning; after he had been drinking like a lord with his dessert he would be in no fit state for anything save bed.

Mrs. McNulty blinked delicately at what her thoughts had led to, and tried to change their subject.

Their baby was not in the least like its mother, for which it ought to be truly thankful, and with reasonable care it should become quite good looking; and except for the colouring it did not seem to take after its father. For that matter, both parents were dark, so most likely it was predominantly Mould. Certainly the resemblance between the two babies

was remarkable; for one to be born out of wedlock of a red-headed scatter-brain and no one knew who, and the other to have the doctor and Margaret Muirburn and the residential district of Forbye behind it, it was almost shattering to one's sense of values to find them as alike as two sisters; indeed, to take their mothers as an example of that, very much more so. It did not seem right that the come-of-will child which the Moulds had tried to foist on the town as their own should have had such an influence on Margaret that hers was born almost a replica, merely because the girl had been generous but rather fanciful in taking it about so much.

Mrs. McNulty remembered very distinctly a black hen which, after living in a pen facing her drying green, hatched chicks with white patches among their feathers. It all went to show how very careful one should be, and she indexed the fact and filed it away mentally for future reference.

CHAPTER V

"ARE you right there?"
"Right!"

Each time it was belled away the west-bound bus carried her nearer home. Already it smelt with the week-end smell of Forbye Main Street, which made you forgive them everything, not because you liked it particularly but perhaps because you loved its associations, of chips and vinegar, strong and acid in your nostrils, and fish, beer and halves, and of where the men had staled from the platform after a decent cough from the gentleman of the party to warn you to look the other way. Pack full, as full almost as some of the passengers, the bus swayed drunkenly on every bend, and you all swayed together, lucky to be on it at all of a Friday night, and hoped everything would stay in its place.

Catherine leaned almost affectionately against an overcoat bluer than any sky over home; if she had not, she might have sunk into some more ample bosom. In a moment he would have to return the compliment, and drop ash on her shoulder, on the green suit that would take more than an airing now to recover its peaty smell of tweed; she would have to get some for it out of a bottle.

She had always dressed in greens, from dark grey-green to emerald and the green of verdigris, sometimes in the softest shades like the centre of a primrose, and then she would get a rare and fragrant look, but mostly she chose the colours of the hills. Once Margaret had scoffed at her preferences; black and white were a woman's wear according to her, and now if she could get her way she would have had Cathie in scarlet as a warning; and Cathie had answered that there at least God and she had something in common, and would Margaret please keep her comments where she was concerned until she was out of hearing, and anyway most folk knew that women did not dress to please men as she seemed to think, but quite the reverse. When Margaret had seen what she meant she was awful shocked and had not spoken to her again for days.

Going home. Funny how your heart kept to the slow quiet rhythm, while upstairs they were roaming in the gloaming. Going home, and slim as a whippet and no bundle this time; settling down, they would say, and perhaps be willing to forgive; they may smile on you in the street again, like the man opposite, only he was skin full of course, and apologetic almost for not giving you the seat. It was perhaps as well, or anything might happen. Margaret would not appreciate a journey like this, it was hardly in the best traditions of Slobhill, where everyone carried his liquor although he might be bursting; you might be surprised at what you could do yourself in a pinch; only Margaret was never pinched. She had never been away from home, so she would not be able to feel like this, kind towards everyone . . . human kind.

"Going home, Cathie?"

Someone in a forward seat had twisted around to ask her.

"Am I no'!"

And she laughed. It was old Pat Healy, Irish the big sinner, crying your name all over the place.

"Aye, I'm going home, and yours is the first kent face."

"Ach, away, hen; you'll not need to let it put you off."

"It'll not do that."

"It would be a mercy if something could put a few of the folk off this bus."

"Stand right inside, please." The conductor made another attempt to clear his platform before someone rolled off into the dark. "And look you here, I canno' swim."

"You leave me be, I'm warning you!"

"It ought not to be allowed, with ladies present."

"Ah, you made a mistake, getting on this bus, ma'am; you speak to them and they'll put on a special for indignant gentlewomen."

"And then we shall all be more comfortable!"

They were baiting a large woman taking up half of the side seat, all rings and righteousness; Cathie looked around at her, and made a safe bet with herself that she put her dog out of the front door every morning, trollopping in flannel feet, and watched it from the window.

"A real lady wouldno' notice nothing."

Cathie supposed that what was meant would bar her, but since no one in Slobhill would be very likely to extend a

welcome to her after her little escapade, as they would call it, she felt she might as well resign herself to the fact. She smiled, wondering if it had ever greatly worried her.

"What can have brought you back to this soss of a place? Boy friend, I suppose?"

The blue overcoat was asking; with his barn-door shoulders he looked as though he belonged to Forbye . . . two more halves and it would belong to him. His face was grey from underground; no wonder he put on brightness when he left his work.

"I'm away home to see my granny!"

Those around laughed, and she knew she had given the right answer.

"And I doubt she'll be right glad to see you."

"I wouldno' complain mysel'."

"Have you been away for long?"

"About two years."

"And far from home, for I hear you've the English twang."

"Right down where the sun shines."

"Can you no' see for yourself, she's brought some home for us under her hat!"

"Whisht, Jock, don't you be so pass-remarkable."

Cathie smiled at the little miner; the woman beside her looked as though she would gladly have thrown him on her fire along with his own coal. From up the bus Pat Healy turned around and bellowed.

"I'll no' have that! Our Cathie's a Forbye yin, ginger-head and all!"

"Ach, she knows fine it's only my fun; she's a proper lass."

"If she was to give you a curl, Jock, you could fix it in your hat and I doubt you wouldno' need your wee lamp!"

"Suppose it faded," said Cathie. "And left you in the dark?"

There was a chorus of mock dismay.

"Aw, lady, how could you so!"

Someone beside her, she knew, was very certain not only that it would, but that she had lowered herself by mentioning it.

"Flechan Street!"

"This is me."

Hands took her case and passed it after her, as others helped her to push out to the platform.

"Cheerie-bye, Cathie; be good now!"

"Bye-bye!"

"Are you right there?"

"Thank you; bye-bye."

Birr-birr. The bus moved away; she waited for it to give her a view of the lamp-lit road and then crossed towards the bigger houses on the other side. Passing under the lights folk glanced at her, out by herself or because she was off the bus.

Someone turned almost around.

"Who is that? I know the face."

"Cathie Mould."

"Eh?"

"Mould!"

"Oh, is that the one who . . ."

Cathie's step faltered. Two years of good conduct and still no remission; if it was to be like that, she might as well have ripped out those pages and tossed them aside. Perhaps in time, and with seeing her around, they would grow tired of talking about her.

Her hand went to her hat to be sure of its effect, and tweaked the jacket for a smoother waist; her shadow, long and dark in front of her, faded and jumped behind as she approached the next lamp.

Of three youths passing, two stepped off the pavement to kick at a can in the gutter, the other looked back.

"Whee-ouee!"

"Hullo, Isa; it's me again. Bad pennies, you know."

Isa's glance, dismayed for one instant, recovered.

"Nonsense, Miss Cathie."

"Tell me, how is my wean?"

"Oh, she's a pet! But don't let them hear you; they'd be awful jealous."

"Where are they all, upstairs?"

"Aye. We have had supper, but I'll bring you a tray."

"It would be lovely if you could."

Cathie ran up the stairs and tapped on the door of the small room, opened it a few inches. She dropped her voice, making it low and bed-side.

"May the doctor come in?"

"Cathie! This week-end?"

"I managed off, and just took a bus. Is that all right?" Little demonstrations all around showed that it was.

"You'll be starved, Cathie?"

"Isa is bringing up something; can I have it here with you?"

She took off her hat and tossed it on to the bookshelf.

"I like that one, Cathie; you're looking awful smart."

"And you're looking awful bonny! Mary is going to be the family beauty; she has the sweetest face of any, has she not, Daddy?"

"There's nothing wrong with one of my girls."

"But there's the dearest face of all asleep in her cot," said Mary.

"My wee Cathie! I must see her."

"Hush," said their mother. "Everyone thinks of her as ours now, they've all forgotten."

She heard again the deaf woman begin her history, and the whistle on the street.

"I'll say they have!"

When Isa came, Cathie went to open her case for the things she had brought them.

"This is yours, Isa, for when you go out. Put some on your elbows! I think it has a lovely smell. Only don't let Daddy get to windward of you, because he doesn't believe we girls should try to improve on nature."

When Isa McCracken went home on Saturday afternoon the faint scent of a remote garden drifted into the room, to die among the pipe smoke.

"You been at Cathie's perfumes and muck?"

"She hasno' any; but she brought me a bottle, awful delicate and she said not to use much at a time."

"Are you telling me yon Cathie doesno' use scents and soaps and dear knows what else to get herself up the way she goes about? I saw her down the street the day!"

Mrs. McCracken left them to imagine what they chose.

"I'm no' saying what she uses, but she doesno' leave it around," said Isa. "She had the bath running last night until you couldn't see across the landing. . . ."

"And it didno' take out the curl?"

"Permed," said Mrs. McCracken, and she sniffed.

"What if it is?" said Apple Johnnie, and got a look which asked him what was he doing in here, anyway?

". . . and she came down to me in her bare feet and a bit of a silk wrap which would do more harm than good, and she said to me, Give us a piece of red soap, Isa, there's a dear, I need it after that bus journey! And she went off with a half-bar like we use on the floors, to scrub herself with that, and singing kind of quietly all the time."

"What did she sing?"

"Oh, some dirge about going home. Though I must say, she fairly brightens up the house."

"And what does her trootler think of her?"

"I saw Cathie with her this morning, and when Mrs. Mould came in she laughed and said Mum-mum, and Cathie put her down and she went straight to her granny. Mrs. Mould seemed to like it, and was trying to get her to say Cathie, but I doubt Cathie herself was almost in tears."

No one disputed it.

"Then she canno' be so bad!" said Alick.

"Maybe she has settled down by now," said Isa.

"I saw her down the street," said Mrs. McCracken. "Looking as though she could buy the place."

"No need for that," said Johnnie. "Your Alick would make her a gift of it for the asking."

"Let me catch him! The trouble with you men is that you canno' look beyond a pretty head."

"I wouldno' say that," said Johnnie.

She chased around for what he might be meaning, and decided that whatever it was it would be no good.

"Come on with you all, now; finish your teas and get off to the football. Cathie will keep."

However that might be, Mrs. McCracken had her out again as soon as the men had gone.

"And Margaret Muirburn, has she been down there yet? Come along, Isa, give me the chat, do; it's like getting blood out of a stone!"

"Oh, aye; she was down this morning with the pram, to show off her new pony skin. You know what she is like: Good-morning, Isa, the doctor will call in as he passes, you might have coffee ready so as not to delay him. The cheek of her, as if I was Phemie in her own house. And then Cathie

comes down, and as soon as she sees Margaret she took a wee sniff and said she thought she had smelt stables. It upset Margaret, and when Cathie was looking at the baby and saying how like she was to young Cathie, that did not please her either."

"They are something alike; was Cathie not suprised?"

"No; she seemed to think it was funny; I heard her tell her sister that she would sell her the other to make up the pair. Margaret went kind of mad-quiet, and said some folk would sell anything would they not? And Cathie laughed, like she does when there is nothing to laugh at, and said: Yes, or give it away for a good home."

Mrs. McCracken listened, to make what she could of it. "She is a rum one, no mistake. Do you think she really wanted Dr. Jimmy herself?"

"I couldno' say. There's no love lost between them now, although she was joking with him. Tell me, doctor, she said, are you kept busy with your baby work! But he flushed up just as if he had not been her sister's husband, and his wife there herself with the baby, and all."

"Well, I don't know," Mrs. McCracken considered. "It was not a very nice thing to say."

Down the town that morning Cathie had gone prepared to be friends. She would dearly have loved to take the pram, and push it in and out the shops with her pride and affection sunning themselves at last, but had decided against it for fear of affronting some who guarded those privileges.

Coming around from South Street a lad bumped into her; she remembered the cheeky face of one of those boys last night, probably he had done the whistling. The girl with him now glanced around to greet her with a smile that was gladdening, from dark sooty eyes, and had gone before Cathie recognised her as Sheilie. With that she had to be content.

Ahead of her and on the other side Laurence Deyken took three steps back to look at the telegram in the *Fugleman* window until she had passed. Forbye's link with the drama, the *Fugleman* had called him, but from now on she would prefer Apple Johnnie's style, when he had dubbed him that bastard of the illegitimate stage, because he came on regularly at the *Wee, Glassford's Cosiest Theatre*, opening each season

with unlicensed plays produced for art's sake by Laurence himself and closing with successes produced by Austerne Kniblochie for what they were worth. It would be useless to delude herself by imagining he did not recognise her; he had been glad enough to go about with her in the old days, he and Skeil Newouse and Harry Royal were all at school with her brothers and had vied with them for their teacher's favour, Tessa Mann she was, and she had a mixed class of seniors, dirty, not so dirty and very dirty, and then later they had seemed never out of the house. Cathie had heard that since she had been away he had married Patience and they called her his strawful bedded wife, because Mrs. McNulty said she had seen them like lovers in a harvest field . . . asleep, the country air too strong for them, if the truth was known; where was the harm? God give me Patience! he used to exclaim away back; it was an expression he had taken from Tessa, and Davie cited it as an example of the direct answer to prayer.

It had been Tessa Mann who found that when she read to Laurence he could repeat it later, word for word, accent, intonation and all; the boy had a memory and voice mechanism as good as any piece of office equipment. And later, when he had found his feet by going on the concert platform in the memorial hall and singing that he dreamed of Jeannie with the light brown hair . . . with his hands held stiff in front of him as though he was measuring a door and looking, Apple Johnnie said, more as though he had been tossing awake all night thinking of Cathie with hers like polished pennies . . . then Tessa had taken him along to Austerne who was producing at the *Wee Theatre*. And he, who had the gift of knowing just what he wanted done but could do damn-all of it himself, seemed to wind Laurence up and send him walking on to the boards, and no one would have guessed to hear the folk applauding that the wretched Kniblochie was over a chair in the back-stage, hung out like a steamy clout, skin-full of Scotch and aspirin. That was the tale, anyway; Cathie knew nothing, she had been away too much, only what she was told and who could believe a word of that? Folk would say anything about him in his home-town, just in case he should get thinking too much of himself with seeing his likeness in the *Fugleman* and printed under it his name;

sometimes too they spelt it right, but it did not matter if it was not, everyone knew Laurence, and it was a sign of affection that they bothered.

Cathie wondered if Skeil Newous too would pass her on the street; she did not think he would. He was thin and kind of lost-looking, and she liked that sort now better than the fine handsome fellows. Skeil was secretary of the Forbye Literary Circle, on the strength of his having on his shelf a copy of *Finnegan's Wake*, uncut after the prankquean's riddle, and this too had given him the lead over Dr. Jimmy, who had held it until then by keeping a genuine Bodley Head *Ulysses* in his consulting room safe and passing it, heavily wrapped in brown paper, from hand to hand among very carefully selected and understanding persons. It was Skeil who had the thankless job of persuading someone each month to address the meetings on booky subjects, or give instructive little talks on the how-I-achieved-my-success lines, and he managed to do it with a charm of manner that very nearly concealed his awareness that all who were willing to talk had nothing of any value to say, while those who had plenty to say could not be bothered to keep their dates. For those awkward times when the speaker did not come, Skeil kept a popular correspondence course in journalism and fiction writing, and in fifteen easy lessons was sharing the earning capacity he had distilled from them himself, half-a-crown from the *Glassford Herald* for a sketch *How Clean is a New Pin* and five shillings from the *Fugleman* for a column description of Main Street on a wet Saturday night, which Johnnie said was verbose and grossly overpaid since he had often done it better himself in two words and free of charge. Skeil's own particular line was the drama, and several times he had come very near indeed to getting something on at the *Wee*, and was all the more likeable for his gift for turning disappointment into a joke; as he so often said, he worked very hard at his play.

But there was no glimpse of Skeil on Main Street this morning. Only a marmalade cat lying in the gutter where it had been thrown after being hit on the road, surely days ago; and old Mrs. Royal coming out of Ritchie's to her car, and keeping the chauffeur at the door while she stood on the pavement at gaze until Cathie was by, and taking an extra

turn of the dog lead on her wrist as if to hold Angus back. It would be a social service if she did the same for her grandson, speeding in his fine roadster and almost knocking you off the street.

Coming up was Alick McCracken's wife; Cathie wondered if she would care for her to speak, seeing the way folk were, and she did not want to make it awkward for her simply because he was her father's man. But Mrs. McCracken turned to Lizzie MacGrum's for the sweeties in good time, while they were still too far off to make any greeting.

Main Street was long; in her exile she had gone over every step of the full length, from the high spots of the paving that you trod to get through the wet spreading from the entrance of the cube stone building where the cars stopped unexpectedly under the railway bridge with *No Popery* splashed in whitewash along the span, right down to the Cross, the cemetery folk called it because the chances were that sooner or later you would be killed there. She remembered all the shops and what was in each window; some things had not been moved in twenty years you would swear and risk the lie, and the names above the doors which, as a child, she had woven in her mind to fit their trades. There was *Luke Delaney* at the *White House* although it was painted morality grey, with windows and doors shiny with varnish over dark green, *WINES & SPIRITS* in big letters under the eaves and *BRANDIES* squeezed in across the side door set at an angle on the corner of the loan, some tight work put into the lettering of the *IES*. And *Bishop* the fishop; and *Kitty Hunker* the ironmonker with everything in the window from miners' lamps to a toothbrush; and *McGuire* the chip frier; *Sweetman* the meatman; *Leave-me Laye*, *Cash Advanced on all Articles of Virtue*; *Fertilisa Potter* the corn and seedsman's daughter; *Perce Boyce* the butcher; *McNiece's* tweedy twoo-pieces; *Henderson*, *McVicar's* suspenderson knickers; and little windows stocked with rusty safety pins, dusty safety razors and musty safety matches, bottles of castor oil sealed with gelatine and packets of cornflour unsealed by sunshine, phials of aspirins and cards of cascara and other mysteries labelled *Female Pills*, *Quick Safe and Certain*, and the signboard over one shop with the plain statement of that sad truth, *Ladies Wear*.

She smiled to think of herself coming home expecting to find they had forgiven her, as if she could buy welcome in a poke or take pleasure like pills, safe and certain and quick above all. There had been one flaw in her defence by keeping away from the town; while it might have done some good in establishing young Cathie, she had exposed herself to gossip concerning the kind of life she might be leading. For a time, perhaps forever, they were determined to have it that she was a bad lot, and the easiest way to get through with it was to be seen as often as she could manage home, until they grew tired of pointing her out as something of local interest, of speaking of her as a thruster who had snatched at the prize of love, its great fulfilment, instead of waiting until it was granted to her as the reward of virtue.

"Two less gins, or a tummy ache," thought Cathie, listing the trivialities that might have altered her destiny. "And today perhaps I should have been the proud and happy wife of a coalmaster, or even an ironfounder, with three bay windows and at least a legal share in a man. Like Margaret, so much the doctor's wife that you'd expect her to dab Lysol behind her ears. Instead, I'm a lone pagan among all the christians."

In Sunday blacks, and furs enough to have drenched the streets in the blood of stoats and goats, ponies and conies, of rams and innocent unborn lambs, Forbye took each week its bible and hymnal in the left hand, and a conveniently heavy stone in the right, and went by the more public highways to one or other of a score of places for worship advertised on the inner page of the *Fugleman*, in the column of those smaller spaces beside the big local entertainments, there to suck sweeties, criticise the sermon, take a look around for those who had not paid their debts, ask that their own might be forgiven, pay their weekly contribution on their life eternal insurance policy . . . as Apple Johnnie had been heard to say; an evil tongue he had, no one listened to him . . . and on the way home refreshed take a pot shot at any sinner worth the hunting.


Although Margaret took Jimmy now to the High Church, as they called it, not for any elevation of the Host but because

it stood well up in Slobhill, the Moulds had always been in the Gospel Mission, probably because Davie's father had built the flat grey hall they used. Folk cried it the Wash-house, because the goody-goodies were so keen on getting you in there to be cleansed and washed and purified; all that patent soap powders did with your shirt was done in next to no time on your soul in Forbye Mission, Johnnie said, and no one was able to see the holes he swore they worried into it. Indeed folk said old Mould had done so well on the job, with one thing leading to another and the masons at the back of him, that his business as good as rested on it, and Davie would no more have dreamed of leaving the Mission than he would have invited his luck to change. And why should he? For there he was at the top, he could have gone no higher without a challenge to the twelve themselves, and he had the ear of the brotherhood, the respect of all Forbye and the best kept hat on Flechan Street.

It was a good hat; sleek, and high enough to park your piece in, Cathie used to say and be slapped by Margaret for irreverence. And not the one he wore to business, although he would put on his Sunday face with that one too. Not everyone going to Mavisrigg had Mr. Mould himself to walk beside him to the grave, after the ride at his head in the glass-sided hearse which always made you think of Snowwhite lying in her case with the bite of apple lodged in her throat, so that you wondered whether it would not be worth dropping the poor body just the once to make sure that he could not give a bit hoast and bring it up, then get down off the bier like Lazarus in the story, but you supposed it would have been bad for trade if there was too much of that. Many of the folk from the old town were run out by the Co-operative van and no doubt timmed into their holes at the far end of the ground with scant ceremony, no more than a word from the minister who would be thinking about the hot tea bread waiting for him, he would be chilled to the marrow though not so cold as the clay at his feet. And even that was more than they deserved, for they had been born without his help and carried out their boast that they would die without it, too.

But Davie Mould's office had a card in the window headed *Our Last Tribute* and promising to bury you with good taste

and fitting respect . . . for all that, folk tried to put it off if they could . . . and after reading it you felt that nowhere else would they do the job so understandingly; indeed, the chances were that if you went to any other shop, particularly if they had not been long in the business, they would pitch you naked into an open grave and likely stamp on you. Cathie herself was not too sure how good taste came in with the burying of folk; the only taste down there at the shop was in your mouth, it smelt as though it had been embalmed in beer dregs. As you entered the air sickened you; you breathed the chill breath of mutes. Four of their lum hats were on the top of the cupboard, among faded and dusty paper wreaths in distorted cardboard boxes. On the shelves were packages labelled *Robes* and *Men's Shrouds*; two black gamps hung by their crooked cane handles, ready for mourners and a wet day at the graveside; there was a yellowed photo on the wall of a hearse, with horses and attendants sleek and black, you would not tell one from the other if you were going by the length of their faces. At those times when she was sent there with a message as a child, and she was kept waiting by whoever moved in the back room up the five stairs, she had felt her father's business was meshed and geared with the mills of God, until, turning about, her eyes overawed by the regalia of death, she discovered the three sporting prints on the back wall, crowded with gentlemen and hounds, enough to revive her so she could knock imperiously on the counter with a couple of ha'pennies before the shrouds took her eye again, and the awakened echoes threatened to bring death running.



CHAPTER VI

HUNDREDS of miles away from Davis's shop, Clement was explaining to his mother how fate was overtaking him. "They're for sending me to a place called Forbye."

If he had this move he would be far away at a one-man office of his department. In the attendance book there would be only his name from top to bottom of every page, a line for each of the six days of his labouring and a rest on the seventh, with *C. Taverner* on every one.

It was a name he could see repeated without dislike; even an unbiased person would agree that it was a name hinting at good fellowship, a full, generous and easy-living name. He sometimes fancied that those old Taverners must have known their way around. But this would be almost too much of a good thing.

His mother looked out over the quiet winter garden to the restful farm-land under the downs; Wellow was so far south that it kept a few of autumn's flowers blooming to meet the first of spring's, marigolds under the budding currant and primroses along the wall. She saw Clement with his thinker's face a shade deeper in thought, his hair rather longer than she cared for and the grey coming so early in it more noticeable since he would not keep it short over the temples; up there he would have shirts and collars in the one, in a small check perhaps, and a thick knot in his homespun tie, and of course his jacket would sit on him more like on a chairback than ever, but it would not matter when he was only among crofters and simple fishermen, far enough she hoped from those nasty reds with their alien heresies.

"It might be rather nice, dear boy. A little old-world weaving village in the hills; everyone in beautiful rough tweeds, blues and greens and heather colours, talking in delightful soft tones at the cottage door in wonderful evening lights. . . ." She was already there, preparing it for him. "But in any case, it isn't tomorrow you are going. So let's only talk of happy things now, while we are all together."

It was her philosophy, to push the bits and pieces of life away to the back of the drawer, like the darning at the bottom of the work-bag; and it had brought her through to a delightful middle age, three devoted sons and their father. Her nature was soft as the velvet ribbon he remembered she used to wear around her neck years ago, and lavender-scented like her dressing-table where he had loved to stand fingering the gold inlay on the jade green backs of her brushes and mirrors, and mauve-coloured as the frilly gowns she wore. A lady in from her garden to take tea, steeped in leafy shadows and sun-drenched borders; it did not matter that his brother's wife dived into the bag and did the darning before they were desperate for a sock to wear, or that their father coped with the garden until its threat to turn from a disgrace to an offence compelled the two who were farming to rob their other needs and lend him a hand.

She looked exactly what she was, very good and sweet, serene and happy in loving everyone and being loved by all; and Clem loved her for that easy way she had of setting the world to rights. She had nursed them through everything in childhood by smoothing their pillows and providing huge jugs of sweet lemonade and telling them to wake up better in the morning; often he remembered how she had sat by his bed reading aloud from *Westward Ho!* while his fingers turned and turned the gold ring on her cool hand, watching it glint in the low afternoon sun or glowing in the comfortable light of the shaded lamp.

"Quite right, Mother; we'll talk of happy things. The fact is, I'm almost looking forward to going, if only I can be sure of some sunshine."

Not only was this the first time Clem Taverner had come so far north, to a region where he had believed stirring, skirling figures passed in and out of misty islands to be proclaimed cocks and kings, where princes were bonny and lassies courageous, but he was from a country home, entirely pre-occupied with the agricultural puzzle known as making both ends meet on the daily round, for his introduction to the realms of uncrowned kings of the British industrial system. And when the train had stopped at the after-thought of a

station on the embankment he would have given all his chances of departmental promotion for the strength of mind just to sit still, to let it take him on, anywhere if it was out of this.

This was not the scenery shown to him on the posters at St. Pancras; not only the road to the isles started out with the silver rails from Euston, but the long deep streets this line had crossed and run beside, where the children played when they were not in school learning how imperialism has equipped the people with a far horizon. The haze of mystery and romance was an unclean smudge of factory smoke; the awful mists, merely dirty rain fouling the towns with a dewy excrement which must corrode and crust the quality of mercy.

Dear God! And this was where he had come to live and work. His stomach sickened, it threatened to start aching; the weight of a heavy heart pressing on it, no doubt; if he could be ill he might get leave, or possibly a transfer. He listened to himself trying to kick a gap in the fence along the path of duty, for him to wriggle through as soon as ever his conscience could clear, and he sought to calm the mulishness by telling himself how this was all an education. He was getting out of his part of the world to see how the other half lived; until now population had been for him a colour on the map, with a dingy spectrum at the side of the figures, which meant nothing until he saw people moving like the corruption of flesh-flies on the streets. Industry and commerce had been gracious figures on a noble façade, girlhood friends of Britannia, and regarding her with a lasting affection, but Clem was not so sure now if they had come from quite the right kind of home.

Before long he learned that in Forbye it did not matter so much to anyone what kind of home he crawled out of; luck was with him if he had any shelter at all. A search for lodgings, begun with little enough hope and every intention of making a smiling best of what he could find, continued for hours, almost in despair. Those he stopped on the street looked at him, wondering from where he had come, and shook their heads at his question, while those passing glanced sideways at him when they heard his voice.

"I couldno' say. An empty bed? 'Mighty, they're two

deep in most! No, you can please yourself, up or down the way, it wouldno' matter."

There was almost a resentment in the answers, as if he were out to take something from them.

"A room? I do not; I'm that sorry."

The mouths closed tight, they might have been giving information to an enemy.

With nowhere to go, one street was as good as another; with no direction, he read the names high and bold on the corners, and wondered at the pride in them. *South Street*, if he were to face that way and keep going it would take him back; bear left at last and he would be in the lanes of Suffolk, and right would bring him into the Cornish toe, and at the instep he could be back at Wellow. He closed his ears before he should hear the sounds of home. *North Street*, he had come too far that way already. Down hill or up?

An idler in the window ledge was watching him. His jaw was covered with an eighth-inch growth of stiff white hair; it was difficult to say if he was growing a beard or had not bothered to shave.

"I'm looking for lodgings. Do you think you can help?"

Apple Johnnie's stick swept aside the lower parts of the town.

"I shouldno' go that way, it wouldno' suit you. Nor up the back; they'll carry us all there soon enough, and Slobhill wouldno' give the Virgin and Child houseroom if they were to knock on every door. You can try along there and beyond, though I couldno' say just where."

He made play with his empty pipe; Clem handed over his pouch, glad of this first glimpse of the familiar.

"You'll have come far the day?"

From the look more than from the words Clem guessed he was to answer.

"And all last night; right from the very south."

"So far as that! And like the pigeon, you had to pick on us?"

"The choice was not entirely my own."

"Ah, well, I hope you find your place. I shall keep an eye open for you."

In Flechan Street he saw the big houses on the one side and knew that they had no room for him; and the row of cleaned windows on the other, closed although the lace

curtains moved as if a wind blew with him up the pavement; he saw the gleam of polished wood in the centre bay, the brass fern pots and the untrodden doorsteps whitened with rubbing-stone, washed a clay-red or left to their own green dampness, and half fearing his knock and question might offend respectability, waited for the door to be opened. But always it seemed that there was a body just at the back of it, a sinister crime which he might discover if any more than the guarded crack of the dark interior were to be disclosed, enough only for the dragged morning head to be seen shaking, for the nervous voice to say, No. Sometimes there was a word too of regret, but never a hope; always, always No.

He saw the gap in the houses because some wag had named it *Maidenhead Avenue* in white letters on a blue enamelled plate set high on the wall; it was not any more, and two barrows could not have passed in it. Or perhaps it had been the same daft fellow who had knocked the two windows in the end of one row, looking straight out at the bricks of the other, and so near that you could have spat across at any one of them with fair accuracy. There was a backgarden on either side and the railway at the end, and at the bottom was one cottage; it had been left down there somehow, perhaps through spending too long dreaming over the bit of grass fanning out between the line and the backyards. It had two windows and a path going around to the door at the back, with barely space inside it to turn to the entrance of the rooms, and over it all the roof of heavy slate was slammed down like the cap on a sulky child. All it had to show the main street was a gable done out splendidly in glazed tiles of brown and blue and a predominance of white, which had misled him, or he would never have come so far off his road, with just this one small place to ask.

He noticed very little of it as he took his case around to the Healys' door, of the kitchen garden and the hen run, or of the two flower beds bordering the drying green where shirts on the line leaned out dropsically towards him and waved a greeting; it was divided from the field by a broken wall with a flagged path running modestly under it to the little tumble-down stone privy at the further end.

A child ran out to the door and looked at him, steadily and over-long before going back again.

"My grannie, there's a man."

In a moment a young woman came, drying her hands on her coarse apron. Her hair was dark, coal dark, and her eyes were dark too, and tired.

"Oh," she said, and added, "I thought you were the butcher-meat."

Seeing he was not, she came no further.

Then she said, "We're not wanting any, not today."

"I'm looking for lodgings."

She had been going to turn away, for she checked herself.

"I thought you were selling?"

"No, I have to find somewhere to sleep."

From their heavy lashes her eyes looked at him, unhelpful. She shook her head.

"No. No; not here."

He looked down past her, to the child half around the door, and to the case at his feet.

"You don't know anyone who might. I'll have to get fixed up soon; I've been all day."

"I do not. They are all full."

His arms rebelled, knowing the case had to come with him again. It was only the small one, the other he had left at the station, but they ached; it was as if the throbbing in his head had gone down to his wrists and elbows.

"I'm sorry," she added.

"I didn't think you would, but it's as well to ask. Perhaps someone may know."

"Aye, so they might."

It was not helpful; there was not even false hope in her voice.

"Just a moment and I'll ask."

She went back into the house; voices murmured in there, women's, hers and another's, and then an elder woman came. She was dark like the other, and like the child, homely and yet young for a grandmother.

"Well?"

She seemed to want everything she had been told confirmed by him.

"I'm trying to find lodgings. I've tried all around."

"Then you have your work cut out." Her voice was deep and loud, as if her throat had been scraped raw.

"I know," said Clem.

"You have a job this way?"

"Yes. I am being sent to Kerr and Main-Tennants.

"They will not do anything for you!"

He laughed at that; it was not likely. "Perhaps you know someone I could go to?"

"No, I do not. I can think of no one."

There was little use in waiting; he picked up the case again.

"Thank you; I'm sorry to have troubled you."

"You're welcome." And she asked, "Is that heavy?"

"It seems a bit heavier than when I started."

He paused; the right moment for breaking away had gone, and it seemed as if now he would have to make another.

She said, "I can see you have had about enough. You had better come in and rest."

To think of it brought on exhaustion, but resting now would not make the end of the search any nearer. She saw he hesitated.

"Perhaps we can think of someone. You will be about done."

Mrs. Mould let the curtain fall gently into place as she drew back from the window and settled her chair so that she could still watch the other side of Flechan Street. A stranger had been coming up from the town, with a suitcase and looking at the houses as he passed; once or twice he had stopped to ask the passers-by some question, but the only answer he seemed to be getting was a shake of the head and a backward glance as they left him. He would be seeking lodgings, she supposed, and she could have told him that he had chosen the wrong street, for no one in these houses would be letting. There were one or two taking in a paying guest, it was true, but it was more for the company and to keep what they called an outside interest than because they needed to do anything for the money, and their gentlemen were by now considered in with the household. She had watched him until he hesitated at the cut between two rows, leading nowhere but to their back ways and a farm crossing on the railway, and yet he had gone down.

She would wait a few minutes for him to re-appear.

"I cannot think . . ." the unconscious truth was said to Mr. Mould. She spoke of her husband mostly as Mr. Mould to counteract in some way the effect of so many to whom he was just Davie . . . "why Cathie has not married."

From a tired-looking stranger to Cathie her mind had come by Maidenhead Avenue where she remembered the Healys lived, folk too impossible for lodging with and so who had escaped her a moment ago. Sheilie was not . . . but the thought was unkind and she stopped it, only to turn to her own daughter.

"It's not for want of opportunity."

From time to time in the family chatter Cathie gave them stories of her days in the south, days which seemed to crowd all their living into the first half of the night. And they had listened, waiting for some name to be repeated, for someone to be spoken of with a different tone in her voice, for something to be recalled with tenderness, but always it had been those she worked with who had the call on her affection, and the work, rather than the play, which she had remembered; it was as if through all the gaiety and luxury she had walked alone, amused and without envy, quietly watching with those green eyes others making their own mistakes or wriggling out of their responsibilities.

"I had hoped she would have found someone and settled down."

"There is time yet; why the hurry?" said Davie.

He would have kept the children around him forever; even with the boys he had never hurried them to get their feet out from under his table. The girls were safer at home until they married, as Margaret had done; if he had been firmer with Cathie when she had first showed her wish to go off by herself her life might never have been ruined, in the way it had been. He would need to take care to be a better father by Mary, and by young Cathie too if he was spared.

"I would feel she was safer; I never did like her being so far away on her own, and I'm glad she's nearer home at last. After all, because she is our own girl, we must not forget that she is an experienced woman."

"Nonsense. Just because some boy let her down. She has probably taken a turn against men, and all to the good. It

will wear off soon enough, and then she will make her own choice."

"Some widower, perhaps," said Jessie. "With a family of his own."

He looked at her, wondering at her generosity, and at her blindness.

"The Lord will provide in His Own time. We must leave it to Him."

"It's strange," said Jessie. "That we have never been told who was responsible."

"You mean who bairned her?"

"Yes."

"Then why not say so, for she has never tried to deny her share of the responsibility. No, she has not said. And that may be just as well."

Jessie did not hide her surprise.

"Whatever should make you say that?"

"Suppose," he said, and then seemed to think again, whether he should say it or not. "Cathie is no wanton, so he must have been well known to her, or she would never have been with him. Any name, Tom, Dick or Harry would have been the same to us; just one of her new friends. What I mean is, perhaps he was not a man she met. Suppose we knew him well, someone from Forbye, walking around the town here, and only the two of them knowing what had been between them?"

"How long have you been thinking of this?"

"A good while now."

"Imagine!" said Jessie. "And who could it be?"

"Cathie would tell us if she wanted us to know."

"I wonder would it be young Mr. Royal from the Park?"

"Whisht, Jessie, you should not put a name to your guesses."

"Ach, it is only to you, David; I would not say a word to Cathie. It's not as though I cannot mind my own business."

While they had talked the pavement up the street had never for many moments been out of her sight; if her stranger had come back to the top of the avenue she could not have failed to see him.

"That man with a case, he must have been selling something; a wonder he did not go to the fronts. Very respectable, too; you would have thought he might have started on this side."

Davie was not bothering; he knew more than Jessie of what was sold by respectable men at the backdoors in Forbye, and they did not interest him.

Mrs. Mould's guess concerning Harry Royal of Forbye Park had not fallen so very far out, perhaps because Davie's household and workshops knew a great deal more of them up there than was ever suspected, for Alick McCracken the joiner had a family of girls, and Isa was only one of several out in service. About his family, Apple Johnnie had been heard to say that years ago the *Fugleman* had kept the type set up for the McCrackens' annual insertion *God's gift of a daughter* which came out regularly within a few days of Alick coming around to the yard with a face which would have curdled the mother's milk, always with the same cry, Another flicking Fanny!

As usual he had one of his girls a parlourmaid at the Park. Being a craftsman working at such a respectable business as Mr. Mould's, he was very well thought of in Forbye, and although some of his political ideas were not out of the right drawer, folk were tolerant because none could say he had a vicious face; at the very worst they said it was weak, and that he would have been wiser had he always taken his dram the same. Just as folk would have gone to Dr. Jimmy if they had been wanting a good tonic, or to Upper Jenny's for a setting of eggs, and to Lower for any scandal, whenever Mrs. Royal was wanting another girl for the house and parlour she sent down to Alick, to see what he could offer. He would oblige her, he said, and up to the Park would go another of his girls, quiet pleasant maids and not too good looking, although when they were tired of service they seemed to blossom all of a sudden, with a husband and family before you could look around. Perhaps he only did it so that he would know what was going on up-bye, but he had always one on the stocks and the old lady found him very handy.

Harry Royal was the third generation living in Forbye Park. His grandfather had built the house and surrounded it with a high stone wall and thick hedges, barring both ends of the carriage drive with massive gates wrought at his own foundry and putting a lodge at the distant entrance, as if he had been afraid of something being taken from him

when he was not looking. It might have been this anxiety that killed him, but certainly it had kept his widow alive; folk said you might take a telling from the old lady, but that would be all. She wouldn't give you a cuss; her housemaids said she counted the potatoes out and locked them up again each day, lest they slipped one into the oven to bake it for themselves beside the roast. She did not even give up her son, for when he had married she told his wife that there could only be one Mistress Royal in the Park, and she made it so clear which of them it was going to be that after bearing Harry the younger woman took a last peep at the wall and fancy gates and slipped away beyond, leaving granny the house and the vexation of laying her away beside the old man under his granite chippings at Mavisrigg, all enclosed by more of his old iron, a chain of spikes and balls like they used to swing back in those far-off days when the men who made the wars took a hand in the fighting.

It was the custom in these parts to bury a woman under her maiden name, to save the gossips' memory as they told about her folk. If it was the court she was in, the *Fugleman* would give her both, Euphemia Boyce or Royal, to make sure no one missed the scandal. And this made it necessary to put in a whole lot of explanatory work on the tombstone, together with an inscription freeing granny of the blame, *Thy will be done*. Folk said that even above there was a fear of Mrs. Penelope Royal, for so far it had never been denied.

After Euphie, everything went along in the house just as it had always done; it only showed how unnecessary it had been for Mr. Oliver to bring home a wife. There were locks screwed firmly on every cupboard door and the keys jingled in granny's pocket; her good-daughter could never have learned which was which so they had just stayed there; and the groceries were issued from the store cupboards daily, with candles and bread, every loaf cut to so many slices and made sufficient until another was brought out. Aye, it was granny's house and at the back of it was her money; she ran it as she wanted by exclaiming on the shortness of her remaining life and the easy thing it would be to alter her will at any sign of revolt, and Harry came to understand that his father's marriage had been an unfortunate mistake, gently overlooked now as if it were an incident closed by the

tactful withdrawal of his mother after she had laid him in the most respectable way on the carefully holystoned doorstep.

It was mud brought into the house that upset his granny; Harry grew up to know he could avoid many questions as to how he spent his time, simply by wiping his shoes on the mat. He went outside the Park for his pleasures, following his fancy in the mid-week and hunting far from home.

Cathie was called to the shop by Florrie the lint-headed counter girl.

"Miss Catherine, there's a gentleman to see you. And," she added in closer confidence. "Don't throw him back this time; if you cannot do with him yourself, I'll take him off your hands."

"If he is another like Mamma warned us against, you're welcome. O-oh! It's the big house and all!"

"Imagine!"

"Well, Mr. Royal, this is an occasion, is it not?"

"It certainly is. I've run you to earth at last. So is this where they do you up to dazzle Forbye?"

"Promise you will not give me away?"

"Now, that depends; I might. Tell me, what exactly do you do here?"

"We make ladies . . . I repeat ladies as distinct from women . . . beautiful in the eyes of men."

"As distinct from gentlemen?"

"I am told that with gentlemen only truth is beautiful."

"Is that so! We wouldn't know, would we?" His laugh swept the Royals and the Moulds all into the one box along with old Boyce the butcher, and slammed down on them the lid marked *Trade*. "Rather conservative, don't you think?"

"That's right!"

"And, if you can tell me without infringing regulations, what standards do you work to, for I suppose these ladies when they come to you are built to nature's own specifications?"

Cathie knew that starch and sugar had done much of the building, while hers was practically demolition work; it was unfair to blame nature for a job from which it had been held at arm's length most of the time.

"Nature! Why, she's quite out of date. We have improved on her patterns beyond all recognition."

"How do you know, do you keep one by you for reference?"

Her lashes drooped, mock demure, as she traced her initials on the glass counter.

"Actually, yes, we do, Harry. You were asking what was my job, weren't you?"

He grinned. "How my dear old granny would love you, a perfectly natural girl!"

"Don't talk to me about that old targe." Cathie's manner had changed at the mention of her. "If anyone had seen the look she gave me the other morning I could have taken her to court."

"You need worry! I was brought up with it. At least you and I have found something in common, if it's only a dislike. Come out for lunch, and let's see then if you won't feel better?"

"All right," said Cathie. "For lunch."

When he had gone, Florrie came back into the shop.

"One of the lads of the village?"

"You gathered that!"

"You might tell him, when you refuse his invitation to supper, that you have a stand-in here."

"Is a working-girl expected to refuse the invitation when it comes from the big house?"

"It all depends on what is for supper at home. But I'm warning you, Catherine, his intentions will be nothing like they are in the magazines; you had far better hand him over to me, right from the start."

"I suppose you learnt it all at the pictures?" said Cathie, and left her to wonder why she had laughed.

The luncheon room of the tea shop did its best with huge framed mirrors to make up for the lack of floor space; as if it was not enough for you to see a set of heavy faces, each with its mouth working like a hen's bottom, without having to look at vistas of the same through lines of corinthian pillars, a gathering duplicated of nice people taking their genteel nourishment.

"Public feeding ought to be made an indictable offence," said Cathie.

"Nonsense, my dear girl. Don't be sensitive. You have to take food, so you might as well enjoy it."

"It does not follow." And after another look around she added, "Most of these folk do look as if they would be happier if they took a tray and ate behind a snibbed door."

"For all you know, when they were very, very young, someone may have told them that bilge about manners maketh man, and they've never got over it."

A woman near-by gazed at Cathie, wondering perhaps if she should have her hair done too. A rosebud mouth was set indecently between the little fat cheeks, pinched by nose and dimpled chin to open, like a child will open a snapdragon, every time gem-barnacled fingers lifted strips of buttered roll or the fork came up with salmon mayonnaise. Beside her a big woman in small foxes took more chips with her fish.

"I like watching people, don't you?" said Harry.

"No. The more I see of them, the more dignified it seems to die young."

"Then make up your mind, and try it before leaving it too late."

"It will not be from starvation, anyhow. Do I eat all this?"

"What do you think, that it was to put on your eye? Is it too underdone for you?"

"No, but this would do a navvy."

"Well, I'm not lunching a navvy. Besides, you'll need it; tiring work, I should say, beautifying women. What are you going to drink besides that tonic water?"

"Nothing, thanks. Rule of the house."

His glance doubted it.

"Is that a fact! Do you never let yourself go with a small sherry?"

"Sometimes I'm all gay and take an ale."

"You're a proper wee devil, aren't you? Have you a reputation to take care of?"

Cathie sensed the first brush of the waving male feelers.

"I lost that years ago."

Because it was true, he seemed to draw back as if the acknowledgment had been a rebuff.

At another table she watched a large neck, pink and bristling like a pig's buttock, warming to its soup; three

men of business were almost in their plates, supping like the east wind.

From somewhere a loud voice called for mango chutney.

"... this leaves a quite inadequate margin."

"Is yours as you like it, dear?"

Cathie listened to the voices.

"I wonder what it is she uses."

"... and you can cover your transition period losses or fall in profits by reclaiming."

"Have you ever tried frying them in lard?"

"Oh, damn, someone has our table." The annoyance in the loud cultured cry of the woman passing was still there when she exclaimed, "Hullo, Harry Royal! Have you forsaken the En-Bee today?"

Her eyes were at Cathie, shadowed, with tweeds and ringed hands carrying string gloves.

"Give my love to the others when you catch up with them," said Harry.

"This is quite a new departure for you!"

When she was by, Harry said, "Can you tell me why I have to know so many of the wrong people?"

"Perhaps because you go out of your way to be polite. And why was it not the En-Bee, where they know you so well?"

He was quick with his defence. "Would you have liked that better? Come there with me for supper one night, soon."

Cathie did not answer straight away.

The jewelled fingers of the fledgeling mouth fluttered over the tiered plate stand choosing a cream cake, which it began to eat, using a small knife and fork as though they were too hot to hold, or had been handled before her by someone who might not have washed his hands. Glassford was her trade mark; obviously she was over for the day and some good feeding. That city was full of them, squat little bodies from their flats and terraces and pleasured squares, desperate to live nicely until they could move to more exclusive neighbourhoods.

"I go home for the week-ends," said Cathie and smiled at her own thought. If she had weighed him up wrongly, she would soon find out. "Why not start by taking me to the pictures one Saturday night?"

"Isn't that rather going the pace by home standards? I would feel less rushed if you spared me a week-end somewhere first."

At least he had the decency to say straight out what he was wanting.

"That would have been lovely, but as I've said, I go home."

"I could promise you a good time."

"You seem to think you know my tastes; you're mistaken."

She had spoken quietly, without any trace of offended virtue; there was nothing new nor shocking to her in the invitation; it had come like a business proposition, and she turned it down because it was not in her line.

"You see, Harry, all this time at home you have never taken the slightest notice of me; you know you would not stop in Main Street to speak to me for my own sake. And I think a week-end with you would be rather boring, anyway."

Just for one moment she had Forbye at her feet and, in baulking the son of the big house in his lusting, she kicked it away.

"Well, it's refreshing to understand each other. I must apologise."

"Not at all; and don't let it spoil your lunch."

From the surrounding tables it would have been difficult to tell what meal was being eaten; it was a composite doing duty for any time of the day, a continuous performance introduced by a smell of coffee and carrying a heavy theme of fried fish and undertones of mutton pie. For the intervals there were stacks of scones, cream cakes and cookies, three classes of bakery which were personified, one or other, in most of the folk throughout the room.

Harry said, "Actually, I have enjoyed it a great deal more than I had expected, and that is saying something. I made a big mistake and I hope you'll forgive me, not for my intentions, but for being mistaken. Because although I find you a girl of character, you are still a darned fine girl. Maybe I shall have to take you to the pictures!"

"It does look as though it is the only hope."

"Yet it is a very serious step at home, isn't it? You leave your boats tinder dry."

"And sprinkled with petrol."

"It is kind of serious."

"Oh, don't ever be serious!"

"Funny, but I am. For the past half hour I've been putting you side by side with quite a lot of other women, and the comparison is disturbing."

"Ah, well; half an hour is not really very long, so don't begin worrying until it starts running into weeks. And I shall have to be getting back now."

He signed to the girl, that he would like his check.

"It is your hair I suppose." He spoke almost impersonally, as if they were both of them analysing the situation. "At least, it begins there. Like ginger, if you have a taste for it, it grows on you."

"Perhaps, but don't be led astray by a henna rinse."

He waved aside the warning; either he would not believe, or the means did not matter.

"But I have granny to think of."

Cathie laughed. "I've thought of her long ago."

"They do say she was the death of my mother; she was only a butcher's daughter and she had a raw deal."

"I know; for that matter, all Forbye knows. And if half they say about your granny is true, then it is high time she was given something in her tea."

"I'm always expecting one of the girls to polish under the mats; to me that seems just about the perfect crime."

She looked at her watch. "Let's go, or my name will be mud."

Heads, bowler crowned by divine right, turned as they left; a mass of lascivious face, supported sweating on its starched collar in folds newly shined and shaved by the barber, lifted for a moment from its troughing. Little baggy eyes glanced after them; over a laden fork a gentleman winked at his friend, whose tongue paused in exploring his teeth and moistened his lips.

One of the ladies said, "Poor boy, he could not take his eyes off her."

"Um . . . any wonder? Obviously out for all she could get. Do try one of these, they are delicious with butter and jam."

CHAPTER VII

IT had been only chance that took Clem down the avenue, and it seemed little more that they had taken him in. Mrs. Healy had not suggested it until after she had fed him, on split rolls and cheese and big cups of tea, and at first he had not grasped that she was offering to lodge him.

"You'll not be used to this; this will no' be smart enough for you?"

He said, "My home is in the country, on a lane that is miles from anywhere. And I wouldn't say we were very smart."

"But you're not one of us, I can see that; we're kind of rough and ready down here. I'll tell you, I like to take a bottle of stout with my man when I feel like it; you would think that was awful?"

"Not if you'll both take one with me when I feel like it."

By then she seemed to make up her mind. "Ah, well, maybe you can put up here with us, but just until you get fixed."

For a week he did not unpack his things, and then he said, "I have not looked for another place; are you going to turn me out?"

And Mrs. Healy put more food in front of him.

"Eat that quickly, now, and don't haver. If you miss your bus you will be in my way."

It was a single decker, one which might have started life as a de luxe coach and come down socially to this out-of-town route, where the upholstery was made gritty with coal dust and smelled of fitters' overalls. *The Golden Plover* she had been named in her heyday—Clem thought that since everything now was compared by the press to what it had been in its own particular heyday, from democracy up to the little man, it was being no more than right-minded to do the same for a bus. A few relics of her finery still remained, like the leather grips in plated mounts across the corners of the seat backs on the gangway but these were fast going for tool-chest handles and other needs of home rule reconstruction.

Years ago this street might have fancied it was getting out of the town as soon as it joined in with the main road

going south, yet the town had clung on to it in dribs and drabbles, and made the villages only heavier lumps of the dirt, all of what they once had been now covered and lost beneath it. Even when there were fields beside it, and fresher air, it was a locality which had developed; iron works had flourished at the foot of the glen and coal had been under the farm lands, all long before anyone thought of representing industry as being conscious of the trust laid on it by a nation whose love of the countryside was symbolised in every heart by the imperial pint of British beer and the *Ovaltine Girl* on the poster hoardings.

Because every day at the factory he read the paper until a girl brought his mid-morning tea, and especially the distillation of public opinion, Clement knew that competition had made the nation great and strong. It was the spirit of mighty peoples. And yet along this road he thought it was rather a pity these same mighty peoples had emptied their mighty ashcans just anywhere, because it gave the land a suggestion of ugly sores, the ulcers of some industrial disease. Bings had been flung down the sides of the valley, and in some meadows they were piled up naked, like dead paps with a partly healed wound above the heart between them, and around it the shale clay in dark crusts of old blood.

Often, missing a bus for the return journey, he walked this way when the night was black as the road itself, and he had to go foot-footing in fear of stepping off the kerb, with all the terror which came if his foot dropped where he had been expecting firm ground. And the rain would make a paler darkness of the wet sidewalk for him as he climbed out of the dip, where the burn was rising in talkative impatience, to wash at the bing tipped down the bank, and it would be cold, the air on his face smelling of the town, dirty. He thought of the rain at home and remembered it as soft and warm; even the times when it was not could be forgiven, for it was rain from over the downs and the sea beyond, blowing against home and drenching his own land.

Most times on leaving the works he ran with the crowd towards the greasy yard from where the buses started. A notice at the entrance warned that it was strictly private and folk stood there obediently, wondering which of the two or three waiting would be first to move; they strained their

eyes for a peep of a driver breaking cover and taking advantage of anything he could put between himself and those who were hunting him, for he would try to roar out to the road without a fare if he could get to his cab before the view-hullo!

Around Forbye, bus travel had been worked up to a game of skill between the company and the people; one side had long ago discovered that passengers gave a deal of extra trouble and so delayed the bus that any breather possible at the end of the run was likely to be shortened; and the other had gained a rare skill at boarding with a flying tackle and could drop off in a crouching position from the brass rail which held up the back step. All this was very stimulating, but rather awkward for those who had anything in their hands, and how the women managed with shopping bags and shawled babies and children at heel Clem never knew, dependent as they were on having a nodding acquaintance with the conductress before she would wait to see if they were coming on; she belled away as the last left the bus, and all had to scramble with no nonsense about women and children first. By the grace of God or the local agility they held their own, and in true sportsmanship never complained much of any mishap; mostly they passed it over with the old joke, that neither the one law for the rich nor the other for the very rich would be of help to any of them, even if he was scab enough to sue in the courts for damages.

In the first days Clem felt he was being forced into the game; and they gave no courtesy to those who were playing away, nor, for that matter, did they expect any. After a while he stopped giving up his seat to women, and took his share of scrapes and bruises with a better grace. To some extent he felt that the home players had the advantage of him, for he soon found that many of them carried on their person a medalet of St. Christopher and gave him their prayers and the bus company their pennies.

At times he felt low, homesick he fancied, but it would be his tummy, with too many soft rolls and Mrs. Healy's frying pan; he liked the couple, Pat and his wife, and the daughter Sheilie, the dark-eyed girl who lived between the cottage and a sister's tenement in the Spoutmouth. Mrs. Healy

always had it that her Sheilie was a good girl and, remembering the improbability of finding other lodgings, he did not feel it was wise to argue about it. She came in for company when her father was on night shift as a watchman in a warehouse, and although Mrs. Healy would say to friends that she did not need her now she had a young man of her own in the house and so could have comfort as well, Sheilie seemed to come around just the same.

Mrs. Healy had eyes as soft brown as a newly peeled conker, and hair like sugarallie, great thick coils of it that she pushed off her good-natured face, smiling as wide as the Cross and booming and scraping her vocal cords as if down lower they grew from some old slap-string bass. And indeed there was room enough, as she would point out by holding her great laughing girth, and shout at Clem, "Four at home and two away, and I doubt plenty more where they come from!" That hustings shout of hers he soon recognised as her conversational tone, but not before his heart had failed a time or two, when she would storm up to him as if she were about to avenge an insult, only to offer to make him a cup of tea, or loom menacing over him when she came in to find him already by the fire, having washed up a few dishes she might have left in the sink.

"You should not have done that!"

And his stomach would turn in fear of some unknown offence, feeling the snow already cold on his thin shoulders.

"You should never have washed those dishes; it's too good of you."

There would be bright stars in her brown eyes, for no more than he would have done any day for his mother.

It was not long before he was teasing her about the pink pills she gave to Pat from the bottle that she put carefully away behind the clock each time; once he had a glimpse of the label,

"Man-Power"

Vitality Tablets

*Promote Health & Vigour. Restore Jaded Appetites
A General Pick-me-up*

"So that's what you're giving him, you naughty old woman!"

"Now, I'm not wanting any of your nonsense, Mr. Taverner."

"Nonsense! You're one to talk of nonsense; I don't think you are nice to know."

"Mr. Taverner!"

"What do you say, Mr. Healy? Shall I get a bottle for myself today?"

Pat grinned uncomfortably, not too sure whether he had been caught at the claret.

"Imagine! It is only that with his irregular hours he needs extra to keep him going," she said.

"And the more power to his elbow," said Clem.

One of the daft things he did in those first days was to get himself a chanter; not that there was a note of music in him, but there seemed less in the devil's own tunes they sang and danced to. Pat Healy had his pipes, a fine set though he was too broken in his wind to play them, if he ever could, but Sheilie would try anything; and his wife—Clem had not been long there before he learned why she had been so chary of a lodger—she had an accordion and without having had a lesson amused herself when the place was quiet by vamping out the tunes. Many an evening folk passing the top of the avenue must have heard them down in the kitchen, picking their way over the notes and singing all they could not play.

Some in the town were sniffy when they heard where he lodged, asking did he know the family? or saying that it was hardly the place they would have chosen for themselves. But Clem said he did not choose it at the time, though now he believed that if he had had every door in Forbye open to him he could not have chosen better. And although they said it was nice to feel that way, he noticed that they seemed surprised and to be watching him more than they had done before. Once Mrs. Healy had spoken about it; she said he might find it made a difference to him at the works, his lodging there, and if he wanted to leave he was not to worry about her feelings, because she was used to it and would understand. He had told her that far from being interested in where he lodged, his department did not trouble itself if his hat were the only roof over his head; he could hang himself up behind the office door and it would not care, except to feel that there was less chance then of his getting sued for debt.

Mrs. Healy said it was not quite like that; it was because they all went to the chapel. And she must have thought at the time that he was dense, because he told her that he often went to chapel himself at home; there was a little tin one,

rusty-red, quite near and it was the summer evening service he liked the best. He did not always go in, it was true, for there was a bank just beyond when the lane widened out in a curve, only the extra width was taken up by a patch of marshy ground that was green even in drought. Some of them used to sit there of a Sunday evening, perched up and gazing into any cars that came along, and waiting for the girls to come out, for the time was just about right then to see them home, perhaps for a saunter across the fields to the top lane and around to the village by the long way. On those evenings the chapel door was most likely open, and they would hear the singing; sometimes they would join in when it was a tune they liked. It did not always come out sweet enough for that, though it seemed good remembering it, but with being away from the door they could hear it almost as they wanted. It was not only the youngsters who would sit there; the old dairyman from up the road joined them often, with his Sunday blacks spotted with milk and the ironmould on his dickey matching up with tobacco stain on his moustache, always looking like that the sparrows had worried. After evening chapel had gone in was the only daylight ever to find him stopping work, and the chat and the stroll in the lane his one relaxation, unless he counted a rare Saturday night at the Oddfellows, or Tuesday's market which was business anyway. He would sit with them waiting for his wife and daughter, and they would get him on about the farmers' union or the ministry of agriculture or whatever it was at the moment; he had been fighting some body or other for so long that it came as natural to him as rolling from his bed at twenty past four every morning; and if they had come to him one day and said, See here, Fred, we can't carry on like this, with you holding out against us we are done! then without doubt he would have packed up himself, he would have felt his spring was just about run down.

Towards the close of service he would always say, There's Queenie, taking her last spite out of the pedals! They'll be at the gate as soon as we. And they would all leap over to the road, while he put out his ashplant firmly and heaved himself across the soft patch, and be off up the lane. The times they had his company it was easier to meet the folk; it looked more as if it had just happened that the little group

had come along, and not been hanging around on purpose to meet the girls, as most of them had.

Mrs. Healy must have seen then that he did not understand, for she left it alone. It was her husband who explained that in Forbye there was a whole lot of bitterness between folk with religious differences. He said his own folk were of both sides, and still were, some in the protestant churchyard on one side of the road and others in the catholic ground on the other, and he often wondered if either party was any the better off now for all their fervour, or if everyone would have had more happiness with less religion. His mother was religious, Pat said, in fact she had two priests in her family; she was a very refined woman, very refined indeed. Not that she was different from other women in the family, on both sides they were all very refined. But for himself, he did not get bitter over religion; so far as he was concerned a man could worship as and where he liked, it did not make an atom of difference, and yet he would like Clem to understand that although his chanter was enough to give a body discomfort, it was a very good thing for him that he had not come in with a flute.

All the gossip of the town Clem had from Mrs. Healy, who collected it from among her daughters along with he believed small sums to help her out. At one time or another he soon heard all that Forbye knew of Cathie Mould, and something of what was said about her, but Mrs. Healy never added a harsh word of her own, and always qualified another's.

As she said, while they talked about her they were leaving others alone. And, she made him understand, if Cathie knew, she did not show it; she went on her way through the town with a smile for you if she had half the chance, and getting back good measure, even from the loungers at the Cross who talked about her, the folk from the old town, and in the shops where she went for messages. Forbye folk were like that, they could not resist a smile or a nod, although they would rather be seen dead than be caught the first to give it; Clem would see them on the streets, the women with their mouths set in a hard tight line, cruel as life itself, as if they had been slammed shut and snecked, locked and the key thrown away

lest a soft word should chance to slip out to let him know that they were kindly human bodies. And the men, Mrs. Healy said they had practised all their lives a glower that would freeze you, or a look to burn the coat off your back, but a smile like Cathie's would crack their faces wide open in a grin that lingered forgotten as they looked after her, at the swing of her hips no doubt, or at her ankle fine on those high heels, and what they were thinking of was anybody's guess.

Before ever he saw her, Clement came to regard this Cathie as having created a tradition in Forbye; the town had adopted her almost as its patron sinner. He had the story a dozen times from half as many folk, and each time it was different. Wattie McQuart, working out of hours from Mr. Mould's joinery shop, gave a version as good as any while a little building job was going up in the evenings at the bottom of the garden.

Forbye folk talked; not that it mattered much what they said about you, Wattie took pains to explain to him, thinking perhaps that if he did not know he might be taking some things too much to heart when they got around to him. It seemed that if you belonged to the town your best friend would blacken you as soon as your back was turned, and think nothing of it, not giving a damn whether it was true or not, who cared so long as it passed the time pleasantly?

"That's how it was, Mr. Taverner. Now, in my father's time any girl who was unfortunate was chased out the door and from that day never mentioned by name. Folk were awful strict; they say they feared God more than they do now. I doubt they had good reason. But any who had four or five girls was maybe not sorry to be shut of one and no questions asked, if it was only for the room, especially when he could get the name of being a God-fearing man at the same time. And that was what folk said Mr. Mould would do. Where's my flicking rule?"

When they had found it Clem asked, "And did he?"

"Ah, you'd not need to ask that if you knew Davie like I do."

"And Cathie, is she often around?"

"She is at times. She never seems to have felt the shame, and that's a fact. Comes home more as if she had brought the old couple a blessing on their grey hairs. And in Forbye that is a whole fistful of nails in her coffin."

"I'll have to look out for her; what's she like, this Cathie?"

"Well, now, you've seen some of the others? She is no' like any of them. Young Mary's hair is a kind of smoky red, but that is no' like hers."

Wattie found it easier at first to tell him where she was different; Catherine was like herself alone. And he pointed to where the sun from a copper setting in the city's reek shone on some cottage windows up the hill.

"If you should ever see a girl with hair like that, walking down the street as if she were just off to buy the place when God Himself had leaned from His heaven and made her a gift of it, then yon will be Cathie. And I hope for your sake, young sir, that you don't lose your heart too easy."

In fact Clem did not, but he loved romance and he was very lonely.

"I believe like you I'm half in love with her already."

"You tell me that?" said Wattie.

And Clem knew he had spoken out of turn, by the reckoning of Forbye.

All this and more Wattie told him during the first weeks in the town, at the work down the garden in the lengthening spring days. There had never been any third party in the talk; the grandchildren were always playing in the street and both the women appeared to be delicately unaware that such a job was in progress, at least while Wattie was around.

"See you never repeat this, mind," he would say, his tongue working harder than his hammer. "Let this go further and I'll be sorry I told you."

And as if that warning was not enough, he would always be adding, "Don't you say I said."

Like many another gossip, Wattie believed that no one had found him out, and that while Clem kept quiet and never compared his with another account of the same things, he would have Clem feeding from his hand . . . a horrible thought, considering all he did with it and only a dry polish on his pants below the bum-pocket between one undertaking and the next. Not that it would have stopped him from talking, even if Clem had threatened to print bills about all he said; and that would have kept him busy, for his tongue went as though it were tacked in the middle, wagging at both ends.

CHAPTER VIII

DOWN at the Cross they were saying that now Cathie was nearer home Mr. Mould should be taking a tumble to himself after what had happened, and never let her go gallivanting down to the south again, to come back with their uncouthy ways and who knows what else besides. For was it not well-known that there all the women frequented the pubs, and when our own healthy-minded young girls were working there did they not get into the same coarse habits, like washing themselves in the nude? They hoped it would be a lesson to others in the town, as no doubt it was meant to be, and that it would not be forgotten how one time she had brought more than her twang home with her.

And she had again; it was a fact, though not what they had meant, for she had caught the sunshine in her hair. The first time Clem had seen her the thought had come to him, how it seemed as if the sun had broken into the dark little town. Though it rained and he had his hands deep in his pockets and was shrunk into his coat, yet looking up it seemed to him as if there was a lightness behind the low clouds, as if at any moment they might part to let the sun look at her as she picked her way by the pools gathered in the worn paving or along the uneven joints in the stones, over streams that escaped from a broken down-pipe or dripped from a rusted roan on to the old stain eating into the cement. And he remembered Wattie's saying, how she would walk in Main Street as though heaven had made her a gift of it just to show that everything was all right between them.

He looked again as she passed, and the warmth of summer touched him when he saw the freckles on her skin, and he turned to see why, for she was not all that bonny. She was not bonny at all, in the way he liked to see a girl, and her teeth showed through parted lips too white and strong, when most girls about the town would not show their own teeth more than they needed to, because the soft water did not help there, nor to make their legs any the straighter. No, it was only her hair that caught the eye; its rich glow of

new copper was a wonder on the grey street, and she knew better than to cover it. It was not that there were no other red-heads in Forbye, but too often they were light and sandy, or a harsh ginger, while to see Cathie on Main Street was enough to make him fancy that he was four hundred miles nearer home, the day seemed so much brighter.

So it was no wonder he recognised her any time they were jostled together on the pavements down the town, and smiled, although it was only through listening to the gossip of the place that he could give her a name. And she smiled back, just as if she had been searching in the crowd for him, a smile that put a gleam of green sea in her eyes' proud dare; she seemed almost glad to find him, as more of the ivory keeked between those rowan-red lips. And he would turn again to watch her swing out from among the folk to cross the street, to see the long line of her leg under the green skirt, the slender back leading the eye to her neck, and then her lovely hair. He was amazed, watching her and wondering that anyone like her should belong to Forbye; her kind should only be born where there were blue skies, where sunrise coming over the hill flashed on dewy meadows, mirror-white, to explain why men from here packed up and went south for their work and studies, to where women were like that, women of fine gold and green pastures, with faces that opened like flowers to smile, and skins warm, freckled with wheat bran on the smooth cream, that lips tingled to get kissing.

The first time he spoke to her was in the grocery, where Mrs. Healy sent him for a message on a Saturday afternoon, with many a warning to be careful now and not drop it. There were women in the shop, and he turned from Ritchie's counter when one of them exclaimed.

"Would you look at that!"

At the invitation he looked towards the street.

"It's that Cathie Mould. I doubt she thinks that because there is a blink of sun the day she is back in the south."

She was crossing the street towards them, in a frock when these women would no more have thought of discarding their thick coats just because for the moment the day was

warm than they would have answered the front door in a nightie.

One of them, her coat buttoned where it would at the neck, explained everything to them.

"It will be to show her figure."

"She could aye do that!"

There was less of envy in the remark than old regrets, for glories almost forgotten, the price of indulging other loves, of new breakfast rolls, buttered cookies and fish teas.

"And she will do it again, once too often."

There was an ominous warning in the prophecy; had Cathie heard it she would surely have paused to think. Another woman, standing sideways to the counter, nodded intimately to Clem, either to instruct him or to put him at his ease.

"Aye, the time will come, then we shall see a difference."

She spoke in an undertone, for Ritchie was coming in from the back with the rolled ham he had gone to fetch; some had been heard to say that although they came to him for things instead of to the co-op because of the personal attention, at times he went too far.

"Whisht, here she is coming."

In the doorway Catherine paused, half turned from the dark interior to search in her handbag, perhaps for the shopping list. The sunlight streaming full across the street crowned her in a golden haze, pierced her frock and what else she had and stripped her silhouette against the strong light. Clem heard Ritchie draw his breath as he too saw the framed picture.

"She will get her death, the body."

The shocked murmur expressed the mildest comment on such an exhibition.

When she came into the shop she took a place quietly behind the group who seemed to have drawn together against the counter, and she must have seen Clem on the edge of it, for she smiled in uncertain recognition.

"Good afternoon," he said.

He saw she was a little surprised; she had not expected the greeting, and in front of all the shop, but she smiled again and bowed formally, as if she felt it was expected of her—you know what the English are, sticklers for the correct thing and quite unable to take you as they find you, although you

yourself would never go crying the day to complete strangers as if you had taken leave of your senses.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she said then, and looked at him again and longer, with those green-grey eyes; that was the first chance he had to see just how green they were. "In this light, coming out of the sun, I really thought I recognised you as someone I should have known. Isn't it a lovely day!"

All the shop were attending to their business or waiting their turn, but she knew they were listening, knew that they were amazed that anyone could bring herself to talk so to a man she could hardly know by sight. It was next door to accosting.

A little bird brought Mrs. Royal crumbs that had fallen from a tea-shop table.

"It may surprise you, Granny," said Harry, when she had shown him in a few concise phrases exactly why it was undesirable for him to be seen with a girl who had already lost her reputation. "But when I approached her with out-and-out dishonourable intentions she turned me down, flat as my hand. In her wildest flight she rises no higher than the pictures here at home on a Saturday night."

"The plebeian mentality comes out; she is hoping to parade you."

"Then I must have it myself, for I take kindly to the idea."

"Just because she snubbed you, you are not falling seriously for her pretence of virtue? Heaven knows I am the last to say anything against the girl, but I do think with her past history you should not start going about together where you are known."

Harry tried to explain how his difficulty was to persuade Catherine to go with him to where they were not known.

"Look here, Granny, can there be any middle course when a girl tells me straight out that I would be uninteresting to her in any immoral capacity? Either she has to be left alone or I go after her with my very best credentials."

"Then leave her alone."

"It is easy enough saying that."

"I mean it. Her father's position in the town makes it awkward for us if you go trailing after her."

"My dear Granny, I do not like your expressions. To speak of a respectable approach with a view to matrimony as trailing, is the kind of truth one might expect from a real coarse old wife, but not from you."

To Mrs. Royal this was a situation needing plain speech and a strong hand, even at the risk of coarseness.

"It would be nothing less than ridiculous to allow yourself to be jockeyed towards that by a mere infatuation. Heaven knows I cannot countenance anything which is not quite . . . But to ask me to believe that Cathie Mould has principles and scruples about that is sheer nonsense. Her one object must be to bait her hook."

"I think not. She has already hinted that she would refuse my offer of you as a granny-in-law."

"Harry! You are not telling me . . ."

"I am."

"That you have already. . . ."

"Oh, no! It looks as if I shall stand no chance at all while you are head of the family!"

"Indeed! So that is what she's after. Does that not show you?"

He shrugged. If money was power to get what was wanted, why not use it?

His grandmother was saying, "And she would like me out of the way! You will be very foolish if you go any further with this girl, Harry. I have a great respect for her father, although I cannot say it would go so far as to welcome a family connection. But the girl's character is too blatant in the town. You will have nothing whatever to do with her."

Evidently that was an order. He went over to the window, and looked out at the uninspiring laurels that grew from the sick earth within their walls. Like this, Forbye Park must have looked to his mother; a sour and repressive luxury to have received in exchange for her happy common folk.

"You can hardly expect me to obey. I'll try to remember your wishes, but the flesh is very, very strong. And it is not surprising, when you consider that my grandfather killed his own meat!"

CHAPTER IX

IN Forbye they had talked of an early summer ; to Clement the long damp days seemed reluctant to let April go on her idiot procession. The rain that fell gently almost every hour fostered his moods and made him long for home, where in his biased memory it greened without the clouds and spring drew up the new growth in time with the calendar. Here the wet streets framed a hundred studies of roof tops, chimney pots and the piling clouds ; the lamp posts, stretched proudly almost to his feet, shrank away at every step he took, until they cowered in at their base, but he had only to turn to find they had run out after him like curs behind his back.

Because outside the town he seemed to be nearer home, he walked in a raincoat under the broken skies, on the road that dipped past Mrs. McNulty's and climbed beyond Upper Jenny's to the moors and crossed a stream in every quarter mile. The sky lay over, heavy and dark, like the hand of the Lord pressing on you, not so much in His wrath, but as if He had forgotten the town and was resting it just where it happened to lie. And in the wind of the storm-darkness was a break where cloud piled up like smoke, the grey lightening to ice clear blue, cold as God's eye, and the drive of rain reeling across it, with snow blurring it like a dark breath, while against it gulls drifted high as hope, slow white motes riding out the storm. Then it broke, with arrows of hail and javelins of rain ; you were barred in by the cold rods as thick as corn stalks, and ran to the lee of a wall and crouched there with the rest of the world waiting for the blue gleam to spread.

After the rain the straw ricks would be sodden yellow, all the greens and grey-browns of the fields and buildings were deep and soft ; the sky cleared and the truant light crept in penitent and flowed across the valley, until everything was saturated in fresh water-colours.

There came good days, when beside the roads the green gloved fingers of the thorns were dripping light, and all the sunshine was not Cathie's. One Sunday morning spread a blue beauty over Forbye, with sunlight strong enough to

make slate shadows of the chimneys across blue-grey roofs, and the blue-green under the nearer thorns fading smokily in each receding field until the hills lost themselves in hazy distance. This was a morning when it would have been good to have been at home, when the air would come pine cooled, or fresh off the dewed grass brushed by your feet, the first of the morning, and bringing on it the sounds of neighbours, the dull knock of old Fred's hammer as he patched another leak in the byre, or Adam's key ringing on the steel as he trimmed his coulter, and the far wheep of the milk train would send Geoff's horse dashing down the lane so that you wondered, as someone would every morning, by what miracle he kept him off his knees and the clattering churns in the back of the float.

Clem thought as he left the town that it did not matter which road you took out of Forbye, each let you feel that you had gone by the back door; only a blue plate warned in-comers of what lay around the bend, they might have disbelieved it, reading *Main Street*, until there it was, Forbye itself strung out down each side of the road, lumpy beads on a dirty ribbon and the only glitter coming from broken glass scattered in the road and bottles in the gutter. The houses were painted admiralty grey, keeping mood with the bings and the smoky air; there was no whitewash nonsense about Forbye. Someone cleaning a paint brush had worked on a cottage wall a patch of brilliant scarlet, and another of frayed blue was beside it, and for that small riot of colour he was grateful.

One man lolled in a doorway; he nodded to Clem as he passed, and it seemed as if he had tried to tuck his shirt inside his good trousers but had grown tired with the effort and given it up, leaving most of the tail drooping about him. The working world stayed late a-bed in its simple luxury of a long lie, and those who with their black books and scrubbed looks would be keeping holy the Sabbath day had gathered into their churches and halls, built, to judge by their crude ugliness, from the infantile designs of some architect who fifty years later had a name in the city. The first lounge was scarcely in his place against the wall, to catch any warmth there might be in the thin sunlight; only at one corner were there folk about, miners sitting on a doorstep and squatting on their haunches back against the *White House* contemplating

the shine on the steel toecaps of their boots. The lamp clips in their caps moved up as Clem passed; they were so bored that when a woman came out to shake a mat over the gutter they watched, as though she was not just another stout, ungainly body.

Some children were playing around the memorial bordered in red clinker and tributed with a laurel wreath cast in grey cement and tied with strands of rotted ribbon; here they chased each other, while across the road on the far side of the houses a play park was deserted, its swings and roundabout chained in sabbatical rest, an iron bar locked securely across the chute; for the salvation of their souls they were shut out, and if by some unhappy chance one was to be knocked down, it would perhaps be taken as divine chiding on their sinful play.

The track went by fields where thin as the new beard on a boy's cheek the young barley was showing; further off it was a green edge to the rising strips as he looked across, the first eagerness of growth, and waiting to be strengthened by the rollers pressing the soil around the venturing roots, to leave the parks like ribbons of watered silk. It led on through some of the old lands, onwards and upwards and full of promise of a rewarding glimpse from the hills of the way ahead. But it led to nowhere, like that never-never highway pasted up on the brewer's hoardings, with a nasty little step at every join of the sheets, very awkward if you spent too long in the thatched pub so conveniently placed at the beginning of the road, which then wound on through Britain at its best, the rolling English road until it faded near the horizon in journey's end, the perfect old-world village nestling, as every old-world village has always nestled, around the tower of its Norman church in God's little acre. The good are at rest after beer at its best. A road like that gave you a fine sense of fitness just to look at it, and before you had passed you felt sunburned and thirsty; it symbolised the British way of life, the road all were invited to take, shoulder to shoulder, the tories hand in hand with labour and both happy pulling flowers for each other.

There was nothing essentially British about this track, unless it was the toughness of the grass that covered the old riggs like the matted coat of some tired worn-out beast, with first a dark line in the furrows and then, as it came further

out from the farmed land, gradually in thickening tussocks until the green growing rushes-o had it all to themselves, the neglect. And it was not much of a way, no more than a bruising of the grass, hardly a trail because most of it was only muddied underfoot as it wound between the bigger clumps; at spots where the ooze was deeper stones and half bricks from a demolished cottage had been dropped in a row that lurched and rolled insecurely as soon as a foot was placed on them. As for life, there was none; unless it was the pair of curlews running in the low of the furrows, with their calling for a lost child, Willie-willie-willie! or the quick flying snipe crying until you were lonely, as they warned the empty moss that you were coming.

Catherine loved the heights beyond the moss, where below was all the emptiness of lands long unfarmed with only the careless pee-wees, their crests blowing in the wind, to eye you before they took to their wings and weaved drunkenly, ever complaining, fearing perhaps that you should be first to see their lost young. Up there she was alone, breathing air that had never filled another's lungs; her breath was snatched from her nostrils almost before she had spent it, and carried away by the wind singing in her ears an old song of the hills; the song that had been sung before the first men scooped holes in the ground with a sharpened stone, lifting the earth with their bare hands to make the last bed for their mates and for their brothers, that lonely bed where each in the end must lie alone, which all must share and none find any comfort in the sharing. She thought that even she would lie easy up here, easier than in the burial ground above the town, another Forbye under the sods; and again others below, going down through the years, mandust that had lived and loved in the scheme of everlasting life, exulting too in that pillar of fire by night and the surge of life carried to another generation. All at peace together in that state; a pity you could not form such a brotherhood in life. Man and man, they came by the same gate and left along the same road, and only the dirt and mess they made of the world was spoiling the time between. Even when Christ had come to show them how to sort it all, they did not heed; they killed Him, as they have crucified Him again and again through two thousand years

rather than learn; when they remember at all it is only to interpret one thing and another in the way they want it, anything rather than love your neighbour. Love him, 'Mighty! as Apple Johnnie said, you could not stomach the beggar. And yet man still grew like a vast tree, life still sprung new twigs along the old branches, with even a bloom here and there showing up the rotten wood; one day surely the sap of humanity would rise from roots in the mould of those savage prunings scattered about the world, and there would be blossom on an Easter morning for our kind?

She heard the same song now that the old ploughmen had listened to as they trudged up and down; their work still showed straight and bold, marking out the ribs of land under the rags that had come to cover it; it was shameful now and it had been bonny naked. The song had not altered, the same wind singing it would blow later through the street and whirl the dust of their empty cottages in your eyes, so that you should close them and not look too often at the poor shells that had once been homes, and at the cold sockets where hearths had been swept for the baking, with coals glowing red and hissing when the man stretched beside them shifted his pipe to spit contentedly into their heart. Through the town there was nothing for this wind to do but play itself; maybe it would find men at the pit coming to the cage and lighting their lamps at the brazier burning there, and it would sport around them, tearing at the white jets as they cupped them in their loins, shielding the light with their hands, as men stood when they were bathing before the women.

Now here as she climbed it was sobbing in her ears, and sighing like a weary lover, then singing as it caught her hair and spun curls for all the world as if around a finger; and it slipped in at the neck of her dress to steal cool between her breasts, chilling the skin damp from the warmth of her climbing. In the pleasure of it she drew in her small belly and let it circle her waist, gentle as the first venture of a boy's arm she thought, until she relaxed and drove the bold stranger out from fondling her skin. And as if it were pleased with the merry game it changed its note in her ears and sang to a thin tune, a reedy elfin pipe that caught her fancy and was gone before she could be sure she heard.

Forgetting it she turned to the wind and began to climb

again, choosing a sheep walk that led away round the hill. There were rocks thrusting out of the ground and places where stone had been quarried by the old men to build the dykes that ran for miles between the farms. Then again she heard it, clear and tuneful, the playing of fairy pipes if ever any had been blown in this wild spot, and what else would it be, unless it was Pan himself, driven from Greece and learning now with patient trial and re-trial the dancing rhythms and songs of a new home. She listened as he picked his way sweetly in a boat-song, then stumbled once or twice in the quick swing of a reel, and no wonder, for it would be new and alien music to the goat-footed boy.

A little while and she remembered herself, to find she was listening to such heathen playing when she knew it would be better for her if she ran back the way she had come, before he was to see her from wherever he was hidden, and come leaping after. She had read all about him and his wild ways; on ground like this the very things that would hinder her speed or make her fall would be nothing to him, bounding in chase, and there was no one here to help her or save her from his coarseness. Instead she stayed listening, and even moved towards where the playing came on the wind, round the hill further, and scanned the slopes for a sign of him.

Her boldness punished her when she had the first peep at the creature, sitting under a rock with his naked brown back towards her as it seemed, and his thick hair curling and blowing on his neck, so that if he had horns as they said he had, she could not see them from where she was. And then she laughed at herself for a gomeril, a bit ashamed too because just for a moment she had almost persuaded herself that if she went any further by that path she was going to see the hairy legs of Pan and the age-old face lined and leering at her as he had done in the tales, with the thought clear behind his narrow lusty eyes, that here was a nymph for him, one with no chance of bushing into a sweet smelling bay tree in a god's embrace. Instead of all that, she saw he was the stranger she had seen about the town, the one they called Clem Taverner, who lodged with the Irish down Maidenhead Avenue. He was away up here by himself where he could practise the chanter, with small chance of any but a sheep to hear him, so he would be thinking, and the wind blowing over the rock, not touching

him snug in a leather jacket, would snatch away both his melody and false notes and scatter them afield among the curlew's cries and the plover's.

On this path she would need to go by him within a few yards; she was looking up the slope when he first saw her, and she watched his eyes on her over his fingers moving on the chanter, then after a moment he stopped and took it from his lips, as if he would not play to her. She glanced away, and walked on, making out that it was nothing to her if he was there piping in the wind, any more than it was to be walking alone, and in no time she would have passed him if a bit of stone, the size of a hazel nut and tossed down, had not struck her.

She stopped and turned to him.

"Where are you going?"

He might wonder that; there was nowhere that way she could be going.

"Just round and about."

"All by yourself?"

He would be thinking she was out to meet someone.

"I like my own company."

"So I've noticed. They say you are so aloof it is the devil and all to get a word with you."

She laughed, and climbed up the slope to where he was, for he might imagine that she was a stuck-up thing if she just moved on, or else frightened of being spoken to alone.

"Who says that? Have they been talking about me?"

He was looking for spittle in the chanter, draining it.

"Of course they have been talking about you; everyone does."

She wished the blush did not come so easily to her cheek, as if it mattered. Only it showed how the tale still went around, ting-tang, even the stranger to the place must hear how the Mould girl disgraced herself; and he was as mean to listen.

"I was barely in the town before I was told to look out for you. A girl, they said, with hair that is a shepherd's delight; I wasn't down the street a dozen times before someone was pointing you out to me, and it was the first time since I had come that the sun had shone. In a parochial kind of way, they are rather proud of you."

"They will be wanting you to see all the local beauties! Off the record, we are rather sensitive about Forbye."

"Perhaps those I have seen are not quite all, but they make a fair selection. There's Fanny Slade Moor, the Euphie Royal Memorial Hall, Spoutmouth, Mr. Laurence Deyken, the Wash-house and the Old Wire Rope Works."

"And now Catherine Mould."

"Yes, now Red Cathie Mould. Here, won't you share my mack? This ground is never dry enough to sit on, and if you aren't going anywhere in particular you can spare a little while for me. And, if you don't already know, my name is Clem Taverner, or Clement if you want a formal introduction."

"I did know. Wattie McQuart has told me about you, so you need not think the traffic has been all one way."

Wattie had not said that the bump on his nose came out at just the same angle as his eyebrows, or that his cheek was so lean that it fell in under the bone.

"And did you listen?"

He was looking at her and smiled when she nodded. It lifted the corners of his mouth hardly at all; they suggested that already he had been thinking of something that pleased him, and now the smile was mostly in his eyes and in the crow's feet beside them.

"I'll say I did! And very interesting too."

"Oh! What do you know? Begin with the discreditable things, just as he did."

"You seem to know Wattie." Small hope that the old man had not tinged her character while he was talking to the newcomer. "Let me see now, you are an outside department's man at Kerr and Main-Tennants, and English forbye. I believe that is the worst over, so relax. You're awful canny, and think two-three times before you open your trap; that helps to balance those first handicaps, you understand? Then you lodge with an Irish family, which damns you out and out, not only in the town but for all eternity, except that now it is generally believed you have never been to the chapel. For that matter, neither do you go to church; so spiritually you have already been written off by Slobhill, only don't let it worry you. On some pretence or other they have written off most of us; you have seen plates up in the city . . . This and That, writers to the signet? Well, here in Forbye we have our writers to kingdom-come, and although you can leave this world without a pass-out check from them, there is some

doubt whether you will be able to enter the next unless Slobhill has given you a chit of approval. And you have deliberately thrown away any small chance you had left, by walking down Main Street with Sheilie Healy, and you have actually taken her to the pictures!"

He sighed with exaggerated relief. "That's not too bad. Nothing against this?"

He was holding up the chanter, but she shook her head. No need to tell him that his friends had so bad a name that his own had been passed over, because they liked their windy tunes instead of keeping a piano mute and open against the inner wall of the front room, as Flechan Street did, with a sheet up on the rest to show they just loved music; the Healys had always sung those lewd tunes about men leering after some quiet lass, and songs of a longing for her man that any decently brought-up girl would be ashamed to voice lest folk should think that for all her parents' striving she was no better than God had made her.

"Well, the next time they're talking, you will be able to tell them that when I take Sheilie to the pictures, she holds my hand."

"I'll not bother, they already know that. I did not go into all the details. She would, of course, and where's the harm? And you hold hers, because it's part of the pleasure."

He looked abashed, and then he smiled. "Certainly, it was quite a lot of mine. But you have the advantage of me; are there spies everywhere?"

"Everywhere. But not spies; they are only curious, or maybe just consumed by their interest in what goes on; behind every curtain in the town, at the back of every cottage window someone is looking. See down there. . . ."

She pointed to where below and far away in the kitchen garden behind Lower Jenny's a black figure had been pottering about; now it came with two white pails down the path from the farmhouse door.

"Did you come by that way?" she asked.

"Yes, and by the other farm further up, with the bing beyond it."

"That's Upper Jenny's; I believe my kid sister already has her eye on young Jock Glees there. Well, yon black spider is Mrs. McNulty, with the deadliest bite in Forbye, and she is

up against some competition. She will have seen you pass, and has been dotting in and out of the house all this while just to find what had taken you, to climb by yourself up to the hills."

His eyes, screwed to focus down so far, were deeper blue than way.

"And now she will know," he said. "I came to meet you."

"Hardly yet; she'll not know that, although she will never rest until she has found out who it is you did meet. You'll be surprised how soon it will get around. That is a warning; you can't be too careful, young man."

He thanked her for the tip, and said he had no idea he provided so much interest, and gave no sign of realising the moral danger the tale would place him in. Because of that she liked him, and liked him even more for letting his eyes watch over the valley, and not gaze on her as if she had been in any way worse than other women.

"You will have to remember when you meet me in the town. Other people do; generally it is considered all right to smile, but there is no need to raise your hat. If they see you speaking, they will say you are not too particular."

"Oh, I didn't know any of those finer points of behaviour. But you have already told me that my stock has never stood high because of my pals, so I shan't give a tinker's tuppence what they say. Now you, you'll have to be very careful indeed about acknowledging that you know me; and yet I'll promise you this . . . if you cut me, I'll call after you, this way. . . ."

And he cupped his hands around his mouth and hailed her below.

"Oy-ee oy-ee oy-ee!"

Mrs. McNulty stood in the garden, her hand shading her eyes and searched the hills.

"That's how we call in the cows at home."

"Have you cows at home?" she asked, not because she cared very much but instead of telling him that he had made her happy.

"My brothers have; they farm the family acres. Mother is a little bit ashamed of having men with mucky boots about the house, but she bears up nobly, with Dad's support. You see, they're gentlefolk; we don't really know how the old man made his money, although we fear the worst; so we say

nothing about it, in case our social consciousness forbids us to touch it."

"If you have a social conscience you will be in for a queasy time in Forbye."

"I have, but by my expensive education I have been trained to sit on it."

She was not sure whether he was speaking the truth or trying to amuse her.

"If I may say so, I think you're a blether. You blether quite pleasantly, but it is still blether. And is that all you have to tell me?"

"I must save something for another day."

"You can tell me one thing; how did you find lodgings in Maidenhead Avenue?"

"I didn't find them. They took me in, and I think they'll do for me."

And not too well; she could see that some of the lines on his mouth were pained.

"My mother said she saw you calling up the street; she thought you were selling something."

"Another half-hour and I would have sold my soul for a rest and a cup of tea. And out of all the churches of Forbye and their pious congregations, it was the Irish Healy women who gave shelter to the stranger."

"I'll tell my father that."

She listened as he told her of his search. That was how it went in Forbye; it was always the same. You would think there was not room for another living soul, but when it came to the bit someone moved up and made a space for you. It would have been better all around by now if they did not, if every couple living with either his folk or hers had been put out on the street with their children, and if every lodger crowding a home had been shown the door there would have been an army abroad that could have shattered the proud on the imperturbation of their hearths. But there was no danger of that happening in Forbye; it had been cleverly avoided by giving the folk a name for hospitality and subtle encouragement to guard it closer than their lives, and very much closer than their health.

"Yes, I'm learning," he said. "Quite a lot. But I can learn damn-all about this sweet thing!"

He held up the chanter.

"Oh, it was not so bad, hearing it from a distance. Indeed, it sounded well enough as I was coming up the hill, and wondering who could be piping in such a spot. For a moment I was almost kidding myself into a belief that it was Pan, or someone like that!"

"Pan? Was he the chap from Arcady?"

"The goaty billie. And a right coarse tink he was, by all accounts."

"Then you'll not be sorry it was only me; or are you?"

"I am not."

"Though I notice you did not run!"

She looked away, and the colour ran into her face again; for that was what any douce, nice lass would have done. She was shy of admitting it to herself, still more shy of finding him thinking the same.

"No, I did not run, because. . . . Oh, because nothing. I'm sure I am as curious as the kye. And anyway, you should be grateful that I did come on, and be company for you up here on your own, instead of speering me why! Unless you would sooner have been alone?"

"I have all the crowded town to be alone in."

"And it can be lonely!"

Lonely among strangers, even though in their way they are kind; she remembered her happiness after Jimmy's voice had come to her over the phone, making the date. It was hearing home, the cars starting up from the Cross, the buses coming up the brae and pulling around to the pens; the coal trains idling slinky-slunky down the bank until they were let through the cut, and the chatter and shoe leather on Flechan Street of a Sunday night. And it had seemed like being at home, to go out with him, safe and snug and comfy, all in the family. Little fool that she had been.

"And it does you no good," he was saying. "Things get out of proportion when you are lonely; it's probably at the root of all seven of the deadly sins, whatever they are. I suppose that is why it is so important to use the right tooth paste; the fear of loneliness must be worth thousands a year, properly played upon."

"Playing on any fear is always good advertising; I suppose

if I had used the right kind of everything I would never have got landed in the cart."

As soon as she had spoken, she realised how easy it would be to misunderstand what she had said; but it was too late, already he was smiling, although he did not look at her.

"Perhaps there was a gap in your education," he said.

"Gaps you could drive a bus through! I knew nothing; I even trusted my friends."

"And now?"

She shrugged. "I've learned more, have few friends and I've lost interest."

He laughed, got up and stretched himself; she knew he was looking now at her, and she glanced up, prepared to defend her statement.

"I don't believe you," he said. "No one going down the street and seeing Cathie Mould there could believe it. Damn, I found myself grinning at you the very first time we met, as if I had known you all my life, and because you spoke I was quite excited. And I shall be annoyed if you imply that I would get excited over an uninteresting woman."

"I said nothing about being interesting. I meant I had lost the youthful enthusiasm for that kind of adventure. And it happens to be true; the other day I turned down an offer to go for the week-end with the scion of a family at the tip of Forbye, and while you may not think a great deal of our top drawer, I can assure you that we do. Please don't imagine I'm boasting, either of my conquest or my virtue, although it's nothing to me what you think, one way or another . . . at least, it cannot matter very much, can it? I'm only telling you to show how flat I have fallen, when I can't be bothered even when the mating calls come downwind from the west end."

"Never mind," he said; and she hated his saying it, because it carried a hint that he considered, all in all, she had not done too badly. "Perhaps you have sublimated those instincts to a clear bright flame; it would explain everything."

Her hand put her hair away from her ears.

"Shall we go?" she said.

"I was going to ask if I might walk down with you."

"That will be fine; which way?"

"Let's go past Mrs. McNulty's; she has waited so long, I think she deserves a real treat."

CHAPTER X

IT was through the town like a whirl of dust, that Cathie Mould and Mrs. Healy's lodger—aye, the Englishman, no less—were off meeting on the hills. Mrs. McNulty had seen him at other times, and not known where he was away to, mooning out to the moors by himself; only a daftie would be doing that, for what was there to see? Any reasonable body would clean himself and be off down the street, to the football or to see what was doing in Glassford, and not go striding through empty roads like a tramp, with his clothes looking as if they had been shaken out of a rag-bag and thrown on; a collar that fitted his long thrapple would have been respectable and kept the cold air off his chest, better than the loose thing he wore and less like a hempen tippet. And a navy blue suit or a black for Sunday; he would have worn it if he had been brought up in a Christian home, instead of the leather wind-jammer; and the oldest raincoat to be laid hold of and no hat is not fit wear for the Lord's Day. Mrs. McNulty had seen him go by, and wondered often what was his ploy, for no one would be going up that road for the pleasure; she had not been further than Upper Jenny's in twenty years, if she had been then. She could not remember if she had been since she was a wean, and she hoped her own girls were the same. Now she knew he had gone away to meet Cathie; very bold and shameless the pair of them, they had sat side by side up where she could make them out from the garden; the girl must have gone slinking round by another way. When he had seen Mrs. McNulty there at her backdoor—she had had to come out with the slops, though she felt awful at being overlooked; it was either that or keeping them in the house all day—with all the valley to turn his eyes on, he had deliberately embarrassed her by halloing at the top of his voice. Till then she had not been sure who it was he had with him, thinking there was perhaps no great harm in his courting some girl, although with his being a stranger, here today and tomorrow who knew where, the lass would need to be gey careful. There was no harm in courting as courting, but

too often she had seen young couples taking hands lightly and wantonly, with never a thought in their two heads of marriage and the mystic unions it stood for, and it did no good, because the devil was waiting at their elbow, knowing they were not thinking of each other in the way they should and ready always to topple them into sin. So when Mr. Taverner had behaved like a coarse keelie, she wondered if it would be the company he was keeping; she remembered how it was said that if he met Sheilie on the street he would walk home with her, carrying the messages, and how the pair of them had gone to the pictures more than once, a place Mrs. McNulty had never entered and she was proud to say it; she would go to no place where she would be shamed to be found if it so happened that she was called home—when Apple Johnnie had heard this he nearly burst himself laughing, and what he said would not bear repeating, it was so awful—although she had read in the papers that there was a good influence at work among the British films today, and some were even fit to be shown on a Sunday in suitably lighted halls, and special clubs were being filled on Saturday mornings for the children, to keep them out of the cold damp parks and curb all this fuss for more playing fields, to spoil valuable building land.

She had taken a good look at them, up there on the hill, but it was too far away to see if it was Sheilie, so she had gone back to the house. It just happened that later she was at her window when there were steps down the lane and she looked to see if it was Jock Glee; she would not trust that boy and as a mother of such fine girls she dreaded his growing up, and was never happy until he was safely by the house. But it was not Jock; it was Clem Taverner and that Cathie Mould, her tinsel head bare and blowing in the wind, and the two of them talking nineteen to the dozen. Just as they were almost by, Cathie glanced over her shoulder and looked straight at the window with her great cold eyes, and said something that made him look back, as if she had seen her watching, and he gave a passing nod, just like he would give to one of the factory workers on the street. Those were the facts, and the town could make what they liked of them; whatever way they looked at them would make no difference, but if she was to be asked what she thought, then she would say it was a strange way for a couple to carry on, week after week. And

it was strange too, remembering that Cathie had got into trouble down in the south, and not a soul had ever learned the truth about that affair, and here was an Englishman no one knew anything about, coming into Forbye from who knew where, and Cathie behaving in this way. Perhaps now, after so long, what had been hid was about to be revealed.

They told it all in the McCracken kitchen, after the girls had come in from walking in Flechan Street that Sunday evening, in the usual throng of folk, mostly young, with a sprinkling here and there of the town's smaller tradesmen and their wives to give that stiffening of respectability to the shifting flood of chatterers which made it all right to join in with them one's self. Along the low wall on the upper side of the street the lads would sit in groups and, made bold by company and the competition, they amused themselves, eyeing the girls who passed in two's and three's. It was what Apple Johnnie called the maiden market, and said he was being generous; and it certainly was the first step in courting. All knew how to play; a lad saw a girl and he kept a look-out for her to stroll back, then he called across, and, given the right encouragement by a snub or something of the kind, he grabbed her hankie the next time she passed, or if he was an expert he would trip her; after that it was a scuffle. It was the only way they could get to know each other, with no room in the houses; there was little enough for the whole business of living and the obligation of dying, without wasting any on the daffodillies of social refinement. Everyone was smartened to the limit; there would not be a single brave dud lying at home in Forbye on a Sunday night; you dressed to be seen and the pleasure was in being looked at. It was the peak of the week; for the next three days you talked of the boys who had caught your eye and of those who had spoken or, as dusk deepened, had linked arms with your group; after Wednesday you let your mind wander to the chances there might be on the next parade, and to what you could do to make them.

Isa listened to the tale, very superior; she knew they would never ask, but all were expecting her to tell how much might be true.

"I couldno' say I would take a bet on it," she said. "Cathie

and the man they cry Clem Taverner, who lodges with the Healys, did come up the street together, and for a while, two-three minutes at the most, they talked just inside the gate; then he left her and gave her back a wave before he went down the avenue. But if she has ever been out with him before, I would like to know when it was. It was only the other week, when I was in the front, she called me over to the window; he was going by then, out on one of his walks just because it had not rained for half an hour, and she asked me who he was. When I had done telling her she smiled, and said it was kind of refreshing to see a new face in the town."

"She did not know him?"

"No' at that time, she did not."

"Then she has lost none since, to make up for it. Why did she let him go his way, without having him up to the house?"

"She knows better than do that; have you no' seen how he goes about at the week-end? And with the house full of Mr. Mould's friends, like it is every Sunday!"

"How do they get on with Cathie, now she comes every week?" asked Mrs. McCracken.

"The folk coming to the house, you mean? Ach, she keeps out of their way. Unless it is just the family, or to a meal, she will have nothing to do with them; she gives them no chance to wonder how to greet her, but will take out the wean, or play with her, or perhaps take a book to the nursery."

"Imagine!"

"Imagine my foot!" said Alick. "Leave the girl alone; I'm telling you, folk are awful spiteful, because there's no' a bonnier maid in Forbye."

Mrs. McCracken sniffed. "Bonny, I grant you, but yon's no maid."

"Away, Ma, can you no' forget it?"

"Some things I cannot, my girl. And it will be a very good thing for you if you remember; if I'm no' mistaken, the time was when you paid more heed to them yourself."

Isa blushed at the crack at her own self-righteousness.

"Well, I see now I could do less than Cathie, and be far worse. I'm sure I wish her well."

Her sister Jennie from the Park, newly come in, picked up the tale.

"You may get your wish, for your Cathie has an admirer."

"Clem Taverner? We know."

"Clem Taverner nothing!" said Jennie. "Our Mr. Harry himself."

"Would you tell me that!"

Jennie had to hurry that evening to get back in time; Mrs. Royal had her maids in by eight o'clock sharp, it being morally unsafe, so she said, for a young girl to be out on the streets after the last chap of the town clock, when their virtue would be shattered on the stroke like crystal glass. Alick had it that she almost met them at the door to receive their good names and to shake out of them the dirt and smell from the common homes, and to lay them away in the press with mothballs until next Sunday. Although if the truth was known the lassies were perhaps not so safe inside her house as she imagined, in spite of her care never to engage one with more looks than would get her by in a crowd. No one dared to argue with her, nor to suggest that if this was how she had found the town in her young days then the vigilance committee could take new hope, for it had certainly improved. Mrs. Royal was always given her own way, but that did not stop folk from talking of what she had in her mind; and that, Apple Johnnie said, more often than not would have done more good on the garden.

Apple Johnnie bade the family good-night with every intention of implementing it by spreading the gospel. Within as many minutes of the stroke of ten he was himself chapping at Pat Healy's door, and waiting until the accordion had with some hesitancy picked its way through *Jesus, Thou art everything to me*.

Pat brought him in, and Mrs. Healy unslung her burden to grind the kettle on the fire.

"Good evening, Mr. Taverner; I was feared I'd find you out."

Clem, after a moment to deduce that the fear had been lest he would not be in, explained how Flechan Street crowds kept him under cover on a Sunday night.

"A man feels lost, walking alone through them, without a girl."

"And I tell him, he'll get none by sitting at home," said Mrs. Healy.

"I'm told though, that he would no' have far to go to be set up," said Johnnie. "No more than across the road."

"Haw, Johnnie! You have long lugs, to be sure. When he came in and said he had met Cathie Mould and walked her home, we had a bet that it would be around Forbye the morn's morn."

"And you'll no' be wrong."

Johnnie looked at Clement, lying back in his chair, hands in his pockets and gazing at the ceiling as if it were a great deal further away than it was.

Because he had been about the first in the town to talk with him, Johnnie had the manner towards him of a discoverer. Good or bad, Johnnie had launched him on the town, and Clem felt that any time the job might be completed by a bottle being broken on his brow.

"And is that a fact? What do they say?" asked Mrs. Healy.

"Are we bothering you, Mr. Taverner?"

Clement rolled his head around. "Carry on, don't mind me. I like it."

"Well, it was yon McNulty who has done the talking, the old cow. It seems she saw the pair of you walking down the brae. Had you wings and been flying like her angels, maybe there would have been nothing to it, but to be walking on God's own earth with the feet given you for doing the same, then it is a matter for comment."

"Go on, then; let us have the comment."

"You went out to meet Cathie, of course."

"A lie."

"You've been traiking out to the hills a dozen times meeting her on the sly in these past weeks."

"That's a damned lie!"

"And you're an old lover of hers, up from England after her to continue with the carry-on."

"And that's a damned bloody lie!" Clement swung up in his chair. "Your pardon, Mrs. Healy."

"Ach, don't you fash yourself. The body's no' responsible."

"She's a menace. Talk about defamation of character."

"Character? There's no' a character in Forbye; if she left you yours it would be conspicuous."

"I wasn't thinking of my own; she can do what she likes with mine. But why can't she leave Cathie Mould alone? Beyond saying good afternoon in the grocer's, today was the first time she has ever spoken to me. Is one always to walk alone?"

"Aye, or in the crowd on Flechan Street, likely."

"Is that considered all right?"

"Only so long as you are on the pavement," said Pat. "They say that over the dyke, under the bushes and around the back of the houses, and up every close in town is chock-a-block with courting couples after dusk. And so they may be, for all I know."

"Or care, I suppose."

"And where is the harm?" said Mrs. Healy. "Where the whole family has a room and kitchen, it has to be either that or the pictures."

Apple Johnnie winked at Clem. "Or the moss!"

"There we had Mrs. McNulty as chaperon; she was in her garden all the time. Is she telling them that?"

"She is saying that you called down to her, something insulting."

Clem blinked, and then remembered how she had looked up on his shout.

"It couldn't have been too insulting for her. The old faggot."

Johnnie waited, giving him time to explain if he had wanted, then he carried on with the talk.

"But wait till I tell you . . . Cathie has found favour in eyes at the Park. It seems young Harry Royal has been meeting her from her work. At first his ideas were pretty much what you would expect from a gentleman, but they say that Cathie was not standing for any nonsense; she wouldno' play ball in his yard."

Clem was listening.

"So what then?"

Johnnie grinned, and turned to the others.

"You see! It's in the air; he's not in the place a couple of months and he's speering along with the best of us."

"In this case I'm interested. Darn it all, everyone of you, Wattie McQuart and Mrs. Healy especially, has told me about this Cathie, primed me until I was about bursting to meet

her. Common courtesy if nothing else should make me interested."

"And is there nothing else?" said Mrs. Healy.

"Because you took me in when I was homeless, and have been very good to me, I can't hide a thing from you . . . there is her hair."

"There is," said Johnnie. "The brightest gleam of sunshine in Forbye most week-ends."

"And it seems as if more than one heart has taken fire from it. What was it you were saying, Johnnie?"

"About Harry? Well, she as good as told him that if she couldno' be his girl friend here at home, she was no' going to be his lady-love away. She said that when he had taken her to the pictures down Main Street of a Saturday night she would know he was not just trailing her."

Pat Healy whistled. "And what had Granny Royal to say about that? Plenty, I'll be bound. She didno' like him to run with tradesmen's weans, for all that his own grandfather was a butcher himself; and his other granny too, if it comes to that; the old lady used to say her whole heart was in the butchering. It would serve her right if he does go courting Cathie, and it would fairly be a side-wipe for the town, after the way they have looked down their nose at her."

"I wonder would she take him," said Mrs. Healy.

"It all depends," said Johnnie, and he looked hard at Clement. "It would be a good kick in the Royal pants if she told him what to do with his honourable intentions."

"And his granny."

"Aye, Pat, but she has done that already, said she had no wish to go and cuddle down with the old man as Mrs. Oliver had done; it was high time granny was given that pleasure for herself."

"Imagine! But I can hear her. Mrs. Royal has not come up against a red-head before, and she'll no' find her another Euphie Boyce."

"Will it come to that?"

All the while Clem knew that Johnnie had come in to tell him about this, and he had sat quiet, listening. It was as if here and there through the town were folk who believed Cathie was worth something better than Forbye had given her, or only that it was a sinful waste to let her light burn

itself out under the bushel they had pulled over her; and in him they saw how it might all end happily ever after. On the hills that day he had seen how successfully old Wattie had prepared them both to like each other, and then wisely left them to meet in their own time. But now the Park was putting up a rival candidate, and against wealth they seemed to fear that time was no longer on their side.

It was not now a matter of putting Cathie back on her perch; she had to go back up with the right man.

"Aye, do you think it will come to that?" said Mrs. Healy.

"Heaven forbid!"

And Johnnie still looked at Clem, as though he had come for his answer. It was then that Clem felt suddenly as he did at home, when his brothers forgave him for leaving the land and sent him out to the fields with some work to do, quite confident that he could make a job of it. He turned to Johnnie and, as if it were his own, gave him the sideways jerk of the head that passed as a friendly nod in Forbye.

"Amen," he said.

Margaret arranged the light to fall on the paper in her lap and leave her face in the glow of the shade.

"They told me in the grocer's today that Cathie has an old friend in the town. She was walking the hills with him yesterday."

Jimmy, who collapsed after a rush of work more frequently than he ended a day by the clock, remained still half asleep in his chair.

"What was that you were saying about Cathie?"

"I thought it would revive you! They say she has a friend lodging down the avenue, just across the road down there. The two of them go tramping at the week-ends."

"Oh, I know him. A chap called Taverner; I remember because I thought it was an extraordinary hole to lodge. And has Cathie picked him up?"

She winced. "In our family we do not pick up; what would people think if they heard you speaking like that?"

"The worst perhaps; and we must hide the truth at any cost. But even if in Slobhill we still believe in Cupid, you're not telling me they rely on his pot-shots in Flechan Street?"

With the testimony of the front page column of the *Fugleman* before her, it would have been useless to argue that in Forbye romance was not definitely rife, and nature potent; all the same, she felt that people in their position were not expected to recognise these more rampant emotions.

"I cannot tell you, Jimmy; Cathie's doings have always been irregular."

"She's none the worse for that."

"That's a matter of opinion; by the majority, she is. But I know you can be relied on to defend her. According to you, the sun shines out of her hair."

Jimmy growled. "At least it makes more success of it there than from our stinking skies."

"It's a good thing I'm not jealous, my pet!"

"You have no reason to be, my poppet. Jealousy is a deadly sin, and in wives with pretty maiden sisters it should be punishable by law. I would get old Cod-liver-oil up at the Park to start some legislation, only the bill would certainly be sabotaged by the B.M.A., the same as they fought the one about flirting with your diseased wife's sister."

She recognised his mood. All day he had been depressed, since he was called in the morning to a baby they said had taken the cold badly some days ago, to find the little lungs were already soggy.

"But I am not diseased."

One eye opened wide and stared at her.

"I don't get it," he said.

"No?"

Even from both his eyes her face was still hidden behind the light.

"I don't like those dirty innuendos." After a pause he added, "I get too many of them this weather. Tell me now, about her new friend; do you think we can approve?"

"Well, they do say he is an Englishman."

"Yes, but that in itself is not indictable, yet."

"No, silly one; but they say he has followed her up here."

"Ah-ha, that makes him a horse of a different colour. A man of taste and discrimination, eh?"

"Like yourself? Only before you draw too many parallels, just wait till you hear what they say about their earlier associations."

"How . . . earlier?"

"Obviously, she was very friendly with someone."

Jimmy pulled himself up in his chair.

"You are not telling me that those cess-pit minds have been putting two and two together? Because Clem Taverner told me he had no friends in Forbye; apart from the family he lodges with, he did not know a soul in the town. As a matter of fact, for that very reason I have asked him to come up here any time he fancied. Why don't you tell Cathie to bring him? You'll like the fellow."

"You think I would? I might see her next week-end and ask, but in spite of what they say, I cannot believe they are much more than acquainted, because . . . I've been getting all the gossip today."

"Go on; don't keep it to yourself."

"Harry Royal has been taking her out regularly during the week."

"I don't believe it."

"It's true. Mrs. Royal is in an awful state about it."

"The impertinent old so-and-so; it is we who should be worrying. Why, he is the last we would want Cathie to go around with. Ach no! there's nothing to it; she has got more sense than that!"

Margaret made impatient noises with the *Fugleman* on her lap.

"You are being ridiculous, Jimmy. From what I hear she sees that this might be the chance of her lifetime if she manages it well. Harry has taken a fancy to her, that much is clear; and from what they say, Cathie is wise enough this time to keep him at a distance and everything above board, so that if he wants to get anywhere he will have to do the right thing. It would be a splendid solution to our problem."

"I didn't know we had one."

"To Cathie's then; although, goodness knows, we have shared the disgrace."

"We have shared damn all! And if it is a disgrace in this blasted cinder heap to have a baby like Cathie's, God knows there are worse crimes done every day and no one bats an eye, then she has carried it herself. If folk wanted to punish her, they have done it, without wishing Harry Royal on her

now. Let's at least keep this sense of justice that is said to be so highly developed in the British people."

"What have you got against him?"

The question seemed to take the breath from him; he stared at her as if she should have known something so elemental that he could not discredit her with the ignorance.

"Oh, I've nothing against Harry himself . . . bar his father and his grandfather, the whole Royalty and their sweat-corroded money. But Cathie is too good for him to go sneaking into her bed."

"Provided he goes through with the formalities there would be no need to sneak."

He waved aside the quibble.

"By now it will be second nature, I bet."

"Try not to judge others by yourself, dear heart," she said.

"Or were you alluding to your darling Cathie?"

But Jimmy was serious; he took no offence from her probing, even if he had felt it, and only deepened his thoughts.

"Listen, Margaret," he said, presently. "Go after Cathie and discourage the Harry business if there is anything in it. I mean that."

"Why not do it yourself?"

"Because it would look like the dog in the manger."

"Oh! And is it not?"

"Can you forget nothing?"

"I can't forget I like you, bad as you are; and I want Cathie out of the road."

"Nonsense!"

"It's not. I just do not trust you."

Jimmy grinned; and he came out of his chair, all joints and elbows like lazy-tongs, and he gave her a cuddle.

"You need not start making up to me. I trust you no further than I can see you."

"Then I'll get you a good strong pair of dark glasses and we shall live happy ever after."

"You will do more than that," she said, pushing him away, as if she really did want him to behave sensibly. "You are going to run this Clem Taverner affair to the finish."

CHAPTER XI

HIGH in the trees the chaffinches called for ginger beer, their heads thrown back as if to gulp it, against the bright sky. The oaks and beeches were done with winter nakedness, each twig was proud with bud, all big and bursting with crumpled leaf, and branches swayed in the wind like the arms of brown girls dancing, sunwarmed in green-grey sarongs. Here and there was the silver gleam of a birch, drawing her fine veil around her and sighing in its green dotted transparency, a minx among the innocents; far away a wild cherry bloomed and, half-surprised at her own loveliness, blushed on her young leaves and hid her white beauty among a bevy of her coloured sisters. The sun-splashed thorns in their green childhood were still clasping in their tight round buds the secret of their white bosom. The ground was patched with silver buttoned coltsfoot, its leaves too late to see the flowers, and tomorrow it would be scattered on the wind; and with dark heads of bluebells hidden by their shining spears, the wind-flowers looking like pale children who know they must all die.

Clem felt that it was a spring too shy, too tender and virginal to live in the rough country of these parts; like a flower-starved child destroying its own delight, within a few hours some wind or clumsy shower would scatter the ground with red-stained casings from the sycamores, and with cherry petals, and fill the roadside with a drift of half-opened leaves. Spring had come too soon, for winter had only gone up to the hills and any night he might come raging back to bluster through the glen and harass her, like a man coming home drunk to his young bride, so that in the morning she will be spoiled, tashed and dishevelled, and in a few days will have become just another drab.

All his heart ached for home, now that it was spring again; for the birdsong in the willows and the scent of cow-parsley under the sun. There would be primroses like dappled light in the spinney, and soon the hazel wands would be leafing enough to coax lovers to wander through their dusky arches.

At the first touch of warmth he longed for home, where it would rise from the earth after the night's rain, with the smell of growing things to fill the air. Blindly he turned his face up to the sun, to feel it on his cheek, on his closed lids; like a babe who seeks the warmth of his mother's breast, he felt the sun's touch on his parted lips, and drew in air like milk for his thirsty lungs.

The sunlight and the sky here, and the spring and the colours of the glen were fair and delicate and cool fingered; but he longed for the full-lipped caress of stripling summer, for the smell of hot fields down there at home; and the smell of warm skin, and for the strong quick growth of everything and the quickening pulse of blood driving through your veins. He would almost have given his right hand to see a girl working in a print dress, with the colours deepened under her arms and freckles showing on a golden throat as she laughed, and the sun drying her warm lips.

By the window above Flechan Street Cathie lifted her eyes to the hills, wondering whether Clem Taverner was that way today, and not giving much attention to all Margaret was saying. Those lower hills had been jealous of their black wealth, and they had poured the rain caught on their wide bosom into the workings, until the land fell in, like the sunken cheek that had lost its teeth.

Apple Johnnie had said that after the coal was done the whole region should be enclosed with a high railing and given as a park to the nation, for sociologists to study the natives in their unnatural surroundings, with all the crooked bodies and the bowly legs, the withered arms and the crushed hands, the club feet and the rotten bone, the mountainous fat and the skeleton thin, the foundry scarred and the twisted pelvis, the legless and the legs that kicked and limped and twitched and dotted, the heads that rolled and drooped and bowed and sat crammed between their shoulders, the mouths hanging open and the mouths shut hard and tight and bitter, the young who laughed and had brave hopes and the old who wondered why, the saved and the sinners, the quick and the dead that lay in tens of thousands in the one bit of their own land that could be spared to them. It should be preserved

by a national trust as a memorial to private enterprise, to the wealth that had gone to build the big houses and to keep historic castles, so that on Sunday you might walk through the pleasant policies, or see the dungeons where your rude forefathers had rotted while in the palaces above their kings had pleased, and all this was yours to gaze on for sixpence or a shilling in aid of the little cripples' parlour.

Margaret's speech came through a gauze screen, with nothing coarse allowed to pass, as if it were a mortal sin to lapse into the vernacular. Bay-window, they called it in Forbye; bay-window with a plush cloth edged by pom-poms covering a wicker table, and a mirror-pond, and a china swan swimming to examine the reflection of coloured china flowers; anything rather than be common, with a fistful of pussie-willows in a jam pot. Margaret had a large and polished brass tureen in her front window, a wide obese vessel on lions' legs and studded with heads mouthing brass rings, with parlour palms in it and which Jimmy claimed to have used more than once for no decorative purpose, but who would believe him?

"There is one advantage in being nearer to us, you will see more of our friends."

"That should be nice."

"They say Harry Royal has been taking you out already."

"So he did."

"Jimmy does not like to think you have taken up with him."

"There is probably a whole lot more that Jimmy does not like to think about."

"You are difficult, Cathie! Do you imagine I don't know that you turned him down flat when you had the chance, and yet you have never forgiven him for marrying me?"

She smiled at Margaret's plaint.

"Never you worry, honey; just let me be difficult sometimes. But not here and now. Would you look at the day!"

Strange how the line of hills could bring to your mind some sleeping woman, until she became real, like the paps of Jura and Fanny Slade Muir. It would be better for the vigilance committee never to come out of their sitting, to leave their eyes to go stepping along the chimney pots, all higgledy-piggledy and their mind all sexes and sevens, lest walking

in a land of hills they would be saying that the sky line was too feminine.

"Jimmy says that wealth should marry wealth, or it is nothing less than legal prostitution," said Margaret all in one breath.

"And he is against selling oneself!"

"Of course I admire high principles, but it seems to be going too far if that is to be said of any woman who marries for love where it happens she will be more comfortably off."

"Never mind, Margaret darling; everyone who knows Jimmy can be sure he never bought anything he could get as a gift. So you are beyond reproach! And has he said anything about my real fancy, the Englishman who lives down the lane, with the black sheep, Sheilie Healy's boy friend?"

Margaret's consternation showed that she had not thought of Clem Taverner in that capacity.

"Oh, Cathie! He is not?"

"It's what I hear. And he told me himself that she holds his hand at the pictures; which is evidently more than Harry Royal expects from me."

"From what Jimmy says, Harry's expectations are flown as a kind of Nelson's signal to the women of Britain . . . whatever that may mean."

It was a pity Margaret always played the perfect little lady, and never seemed to break under the strain.

"If you lunched with him you would know before you had shaken out your napkin; he loses no time at all in running up his colours, true blue on a purple background. It must be glaring when Florrie, who feels my life has been too sheltered to know these things, warned me that if she was dressing for a date with him her foundation would be a one-piece swim suit."

"A swim suit? Whatever . . . oh, I believe I see . . . but, Cathie, how disgusting! And do you have to work with that kind of person?"

Yes, it was a pity about Margaret; if she was not less careful she would grow to be a lavender lady shrinking from the bare mention of the masses, as she shrank already from such expressions, like *naked truth* and *denuded mountains* and *exposed positions*, and spoke of *horse-back riding* and

lady-dogs in case her words were given a low meaning, and to avoid the bawdy.

"Aye, and feel gloriously at ease among them. I'd be a wreck if I had to keep up with Slobhill; while you can easily keep going one pace ahead. That is why I took to Clem the other day; he couldn't say too much for Mrs. Healy because she was kind enough to take him in, though I dare say the feeding down there is a bit different to what he was reared on; and as for Sheilie, I do believe he would rather take her out than dine at the Park."

"In that case is it any use inviting him up to us?"

"Here! I know your Jimmy is in the professional classes, but our Da fits the dead yins with their weeds and timber-breaks, and we are not hunting with the Royals."

"You do not need to point it out to everyone."

Talk like that did not suit Margaret; it never seemed fitting to her that any mention should be made of their father's trade, and Jimmy would go out of his way to remind folk of the connection, joking about the old man and himself being in partnership. It was only his fun; he would say he might never have married her if it had not been that he felt obliged to, and then he would pause to see you try to decide how you ought to take it, before he went on to say that Davie had done so much for him by way of tidying up the practice and by covering up his mistakes, that the least he could do in return was to take one of the girls off his hands.

And a right mess he had made of it, if those were his good intentions; but folk never knew that, so he could always raise a laugh.

Margaret did not go so far as to be ashamed of her father; indeed she was devoted to him . . . and who was not, to Davie Mould? But she talked more of her grandfather, though she could scarcely remember him. He had lived as the local carpenter and died content to be a jobbing builder, yet in the passing years he had become in turn a cabinet maker, a wood merchant, a timber importer and finally a recognised authority on laminated woods and veneers. She herself had built the background she wanted ready for her children, and now she stood in front of it, admiring and believing in her own work.

Cathie made a schoolgirl's gesture of lifting her hair to cool her head.

"You can take it from me, there is nothing that has not already been pointed out to him. Nothing at all. And in spite of our short-comings, and of your soaring to the giddy heights of Slobhill, of Daddy irreligiously not leaving the dead to bury their dead, in spite of the awkward gap between Mary and our youngest, and of every warning against women with red hair, and women with a past, and everything his mother has told him, he said we must meet again. And I like him, Maggie Mould!"

"But you will be careful?"

"I'll do better, and be good. That would surprise you, wouldn't it?"

"Cathie!"

"It's the way you talk."

"It is not. Only Jimmy has invited him to the house, and if anything went wrong, he would feel so awfully responsible."

Cathie turned on her, eyes blazing, and then suddenly it sounded funny.

"He would feel responsible? Jimmy would? That's good! Why, he has never taken a responsibility in all his life!"

And she laughed, and laughed again at Margaret's expression as she heard her.

When Isa came with the tea-tray Cathie appealed to her.

"I was sure he would be going out, it is such a glorious afternoon. And yet I have not seen a sign of him. I'm so disappointed."

"Oh . . . of course! I thought you were teasing. You mean Mrs. Healy's young man? He was away the back of two, over the line. I doubt he'll be going the same road as last week."

Cathie had been doing the supper dishes in the kitchen when Isa had come back last Sunday night, and had made her sit down and give her chat, and snatched the tea towel from her hand when she tried to help; she was in her good clothes and it was her evening off. Perhaps because Cathie never raised her eyebrows, no matter what tale Isa brought

in from the town, but only said sometimes that it was queer the things folk did, we had been made in a gey funny way, and she never looked at the clock to see if it was after the time her mother liked her to be in, nor thought it silly when a girl tried to make the best of herself, nor was above lending her own gloves and stockings and things for some treat, and without talking about it, Isa would thaw out and tell Cathie quite a lot that no one else in the house ever heard. Cathie would nod, as if it was all the natural thing to do, and say it was fine to have a good time, and that she was glad Isa had enjoyed herself, or that she could remember many happy evenings they had had together when she was down in the south, before that time when she had let it go to her head, and been so daft as to spoil it all.

"The sun is a treat," said Isa. "Next week it will be raining, likely."

Cathie was thinking much the same.

"You'll not get the time for walking in the week?"

It was true, and it was a shame to waste the day.

"And you're aye saying to me that I don't walk enough!"

"Here, Isa, are you eking to push me out?"

"Oh, I'm no' bothering. But it does seem wrong, him a stranger and away by hisself, and you just kicking your heels in the house on a day like this."

"But I can't just run after him."

Isa looked as though it had not occurred to her.

"How?"

"I don't know where he has gone."

"They say he has a hidey on the bing above Upper Jenny's; he fair deeves them out there with his chanter."

Cathie wondered how long it would take to get there.

"Do you think Mary would come with me?"

"She's no' in."

"Oh."

She smiled at the sound of her own disappointment.

"If you were going that way you could take a basket."

"And get some eggs? That's an idea."

"If you can carry it on a Sunday?"

"What will Mrs. McNulty say? Well, I'm past redemption, so I've nothing to lose. And, anyway, Isa, it was you put me up to it."

Isa laughed, pleased to be blamed. "Why I never thought! Just look at your eyes, now would you; they're fair dancing!"

On this bing there was a niche out of the top, where the clay had once fired; loads of the red clinker had been carted along the ridged track where the sleepers had been ripped from the line that had wandered down from the mineral railway now lost in the hills. It was a spot where Clem often sat, to get a breather after the factory or on a Sunday afternoon, looking down on the farms and into the glen, over and away to the outskirts of the town far up the rising ground beyond. This May afternoon the whin blazed on the hills at the back, with cows cropping among the bloom, their red and white and the rich dark green all splashed with that gold which the misers had not been able to hoard. Below, a stream ran in the deep glade; the bank fell away so sharply that the wall of a barn rose high and castle-like above the top of the birches, rowans and sycamores on the nearer slope.

The sun shone in his eyes and it made the dry walling of the paddocks like bars of shadow across the lushing grass; two trees held their young leaves palm up to feel its warmth, and they were ledges of green washed by the light pouring down on everything, on the old slated roofs and the new herbage at the top of the bank by the little tarred hen-house; and on the half-dozen ricks in the yard, like skeps with the thatch shining silver as they inclined towards the bigger corn stack, old grey cloaked women in some pantheistic ritual to evoke fertility from the quickening earth.

The clank of a pail came up with the lowing from an open byre door; in a bright red frock a child was playing outside; once a man came from the milking, and from another door a woman came and stood with him, talking, their voices blending with the burble of the stream. The red daub of the frock hovered behind, dancing between shade and sunshine against the stone buildings and the white wall of the house. After a few moments the two went back to their dark interiors, and only the child was left, playing.

With the strange intenseness of the spring light, coming after the monotone of cloud and rain, he felt a tide of pleasure run in him, as if he recognised some effect seen in a painting

and which he had never until this moment believed could be true. And then the words came to him almost of themselves :

*Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is
For the eyes to behold the sun.*

Across the centuries, through old writings, the unknown tongue long gone to dust had spoken to the translators, and they had understood and in the clear black type of the book voiced the ecstasy given to him, here on a cinder pile in a May afternoon, as he saw the copper-gold of her hair on the road below.

The wind stirring about him seemed for that one moment to be the breath of immortality.

CHAPTER XII

WAIL Caledonia!

Old King Coal has a very cold soul.

O tall obscene bings upon the earth, raise them and magnify them forever.

Truly there were folk around whose days should linger on this land which their cordite god had given them, where they had made unpleasant places on the earth and defiled the work of the Lord. Set up your sheds, oily pates, and see you lift your headstocks on the everlasting hills. They deserved to live for all time in the once green valleys they had gutted, by the streams black with their pollution, with trees stunted and bent and stagnant weed-choked pools fit only to hide the bodies of raped and murdered misers, ugly as greed. Or let them die quickly, and bury them deep as their beloved pits, out on the cold moor by Chotts Kirk, where the wind blows snell on a midsummer day, and mark their bones with a plaque of their sacred iron so that the very rain can spit upon their name and wash it away in rust.

More and more of the boys and girls were kilting their loins and getting away from it on a Saturday afternoon, out to the hills and heather and burns and braes, not content to sing about them any longer but going after a share of it for themselves. They broke the joints of their fishing rods and guns and shoved them up their jumpers, the burlier ones, prepared to live like a lord for eighteen hours; others were content with a gulp or two of God's air and a billie of tea boiled over the stones or a cup of spring water.

And the big house looked on.

Very attached to the big house, was Forbye; the meaner their own, the finer they considered a laird's should be, and the mill owner's, and the provost's villa, all respectability and curtained to death lest the sun might shine and take the colour out of the carpet, gen-u-ine persian from a man at the door in a peaked cap, saying he was a steward from some boat off the Tail o' the Bank; and with the couple of overgrown

street lamps on the kerb by his front door, the posts gilt and silver and green, they fairly caught the dogs' eyes, and the coloured glass with the coat of arms . . . gold, the janus bird displayed within a double tressure flory counter-flory gules, and its wide-awake motto which Apple Johnnie said could be broadly translated as *An eye to the main chance* although even if he had the Gaelic, and it was doubtful, it was certain he had no Latin. A kindly light these showed, to lead home from the civic junketings, and cause youth to reflect on all that can be done by honesty of purpose, service to the public, business integrity, taking time by the foreskin, and panting after the dust of the earth.

And they were well nigh reverent when speaking of the gentry's places outside the town, messuages of period in traditional style, all damp-stains and draughts and steps, mortgaged up to the hirpling grannies on the chimney pots, and the little round turrets easing themselves from the top corners, careful of the walls.

The big house looked, and took a tumble to itself. Some of the coal-masters and the ironfounders and shipbuilders even went so far as to open one of their many mansions on a Sunday afternoon when they were not in residence, so that you could see to what they had come from their granny's room and kitchen, how they had prospered, just because this was a land of opportunity for all, and to prove that you could do the same if you did not listen to those socialist keelies or let them spoil it. And you could sing out there, and it sounded better than in the cars and buses, *Land of my Fathers*, or *Scots wha hae* and *There'll always be an England*, so long as you did not sing too loud and disturb the deer or the brood birds, and were off the preserves by sunset; it roused those patriotic emotions in a loyal heart, that could always be directed into the right channels of service and sacrifice in any national emergency, perhaps a war to end Wars to end WAR, and could be sent crusading for those precious numerical symbols, for the one and only democratic way of life, the two in a bush worth a bird in the hand, for the three wise monkeys, the four freedoms, the five o'clock whistle, the Six Acts, the seven sleepers of Ephesus, the pieces of eight, the nine of diamonds, the ten Derby hinds, the gentlemen's eleven, with the twelve apostles to make the baker's dozen.

Often Clement had gone out to the hills by himself; he told her they bathed off the frustration and paltriness of a life that he signed away line by line, weeks written off heedlessly in the attendance book. And then, those times when they went together and the world rolled to their feet; at first just because they had found they liked each other, and that had seemed good enough, out on the moors by their two selves. Courting, she supposed it was, although why bother to define it at all? Why bother with anything more, when sometimes out there under the singing hills she held his hand . . . as she told him, like Sheillie in the pictures . . . because the hills were old and understanding, and he was young and, as she already believed, in love with her. When the wind blew through her hair she would sing to him, songs the children sang at play because she loved them best; they did not grow old but held the music of young voices in their tunes and the words were no matter.

If you'll no' tak' it I'll tak' it to my-sel'
A ring-a ring-a ro-ses a copper copper-shell.

And yet they were not children, to dance and sing and knock the world down. Life went further than a summer afternoon, with sun in your hair turning copper to gold. The gold was tawny and found deep warm glows from the evening sky; like the sensual yearning that held back from the homeward road, and urged you to linger where it was quiet and sheltered, and put lead in the laggard steps that took you out of temptation.

Cathie laughed when she saw how she had been cheated. If it had been like this before, at least she would have had something when it came to the paying, perhaps almost enough. There were wild mad moments when she believed it might have been, when it seemed as if she could have let herself be the wanton they had made of her, and might have stilled her passion if it had not been for a pride that hardened the woman melting in her, so that she could walk through the town and spit in their knowing faces. For a love-mating, answering at once all the seeking, questing impulses the flesh fell heir to, and merely because it should be sanctified and blessed at some time by a few words out of a minister's mouth, or legalised for paltry shillings in a stuffy office, the

punishment was too heavy; it enveloped and stifled the crime. And she had taken it, for nothing more wicked than a fuddled acquiescence, for a sin less real to her than a disturbing dream.

Cathie gave herself a severe glance in the bathroom mirror; it was no good at all to be pleased with what she saw. It was plain and naked there for her to see, the truth that woman made the way she was had been no beautiful conception in nature's womb, but a low cruel practical joke.

And for lack of any more that she could do about it, she threw another handful of salts into her bath, and sang as she washed between her toes. Then she put them into stockings that were like a breath on pale porcelain, and dressed in her black lace, with green beads that had flecks in them matching her eyes; and she piled her hair up in a new style she had practised during that week, which left her neck like a white pillar, golden corniced, and went around to Margaret's supper prepared to do as much damage to man as she could this side of midnight.

Margaret came to the hall to greet her, and took her to her room to leave her things.

She watched Margaret's hand on the banister, the fingers exploring the moulding and her quick glance to check for dust; Cathie knew if ever she had a house of her own, she would fail by her sister's standard.

"So at last you have done something with your hair."

"How do you mean?"

In the dressing mirrors she saw that she was passable.

"Someone told me the other day that she never knew whether you were just going away to put it up, or if it had only at that moment tumbled down."

"You cannot grumble tonight; though I say it myself, I am almost an asset to any house in Slobhill."

"I only hope Jimmy will not think it is just a shade common."

"He won't, unless you suggest it."

"Cathie, imagine thinking . . ."

"And even then he will only be agreeing to please you."

"I shall never draw his attention to it!"

Cathie, satisfying herself that the outline of her lips was the best that she could do, believed it would not be necessary.

"How is wee Tina?" she asked.

"Very lovely; come you to see her."

In the nursery the baby slept, arms spread about her face on the pillow. A pulse on Cathie's throat fluttered.

"How would you like to give her up to Mother?"

Margaret put maternal touches to the cot covers.

"I cannot believe that you feel the way I do, Cathie. I'm so sensitive to the emotional side of life, while you are essentially practical and logical in the way you handle things."

"You are, hen? It must be agony for you!"

On the wide space of the landing open doors gave peeps of comfort for tender souls.

"Has Clement come yet?"

"Yes; we are waiting supper now for the others. Shall we go down?"

"Lead me to him," said Cathie. "And I hope he hasn't combed his hair."

"I'm quite sure he has not . . . recently."

The men rose and smiled to them across the dustless desert of the piano, Jimmy clean and scrubbed from the surgery, and Clem easy and at home; it would have been nice to have fixed his tie straight.

"Hullo, Cathie!" Jimmy's eyes were drawn so tight to her that the room between them all but twanged. "You are not going on somewhere?"

"Are you wanting rid of me?"

"Heaven forbid! Taverner, I always say a man's best friend is his wife's sister. But you do know mine?"

"Yes . . ." And Cathie loved him because he looked pleased to say it. ". . . and well enough to admire your choice of friends."

"Where are you going to sit?"

"On the same place as usual, Jimmy; the settee."

Margaret's face was wondering as she sat beside her, and she watched Cathie's ankles cross themselves before Jimmy's feet, and her fingers put the black lace almost to hide her knees.

"Here's a green cushion for your head; you like green, don't you?"

"How did you know!" said Cathie.

"You would be surprised at all I know."

"Sometime you must tell me."

"Maybe I shall." Margaret made it almost a threat.

"Not now," said Jimmy. "You girls must save something for when you are alone." He turned to Clem. "If we are delving into the dusky past, won't you tell us how you two met? Don't worry about sparing us the interesting details!"

"There is nothing very much to tell; it was just an ordinary kind of meeting."

"They always are," said Jimmy.

"Except for its being with Cathie," he said.

"And they are the most dangerous of all."

She looked at Clem, and smiled; this was good, just to see him.

"Getting to know the people, Clement?"

"You'll find us rather different from you in the south. . . ."

This was Jimmy determined to puff the native character of Forbye; she watched Clem, and knew he must have heard it all outside.

"... you'll find us a bit outspoken, maybe; perhaps brusque, but we're more genuine. We say what we mean, even if it hurts; we have no time for those we don't like, and yet we can hardly make enough fuss of those we do."

"Amen. Let us pray for those we do," said Cathie. "It begins as soon as you are spotted as a stranger on the street, a mean form of banditry that can hardly rank as decent full-blooded robbery; it is little more than a sly cheating, done mostly by the women, which you might pass as a mistake if it did not happen so often, and always to leave you the loser. It's fostered by having a different accent in every town, so that you are marked for a sucker as soon as you open your mouth, and you get a shilling short in your change at the cashier's or a single when you have paid for a return. Correct me if I am wrong."

Clem laughed, but he did not accept the offer. He took out cigarettes and after waving the packet before the women, held it across to Jimmy.

"You seem to be a little unfortunate in your contacts, Cathie."

"You see what I meant, Taverner? We waved our dirty linen at Bannockburn, and we have been washing it in public ever since. She will feel better after you have fed her, Margaret."

"If that is a hint, we have to wait for the Deykens."

"God give me Patience!" said Cathie.

"Oh, let him make his entry with the entrée," and Jimmy winked at her.

Margaret appealed. "I don't know why it is, but you two always have a bad effect on each other, as soon as you get together you are either at each other's throats or making a joint attack on a third party. Have you noticed it, Mr. Taverner?"

"No, but now you've mentioned it, I'll be watching."

"You need not bother, either of you; we don't usually get going until we are by ourselves, and then Margaret has to come with the first-aid box."

Cathie watched him busy at the fire, trying to fit the tongs around a lump from the scuttle.

"Certainly that is when most damage is done," she said; and the coal clattered on the hearth.

"You were talking about us down south; do you know it well?"

"Only a few spots."

"Why, Jimmy, you have been scores of times! Not since we have been married, but you were down there for your holidays before, were you not?"

"I believe you're right."

"Yes, because Cathie was quite near you, and you took her out."

"Fancy you remembering that!"

"And do you not, Jimmy?" said Cathie.

"I'll never forget. I haven't been allowed off on my own since."

"We used to tease him," said Margaret. "Mary always had it that he was down there to see Cathie, trying to make up his mind which of us he would have."

Clem laughed. "I've heard how the men are spoilt up here, but I didn't know it went so far as offering them a choice like that."

Cathie touched Margaret's arm and drew her attention to him.

"Don't look now, but I believe the gentleman is giving us compliments."

"If there had been a choice I do believe I would have split my personality," Jimmy said, uneasily gallant.

"And I don't know that I like the compliment," said Margaret. "Jimmy always says she turned him down, and

I never am quite sure if he is only joking. It is a trifle awkward to think of one's self bracketed like that with a sister in the husband's affections!"

Jimmy explained, "The sisters Mould, you'll notice, do not always hang together; as they should . . . in public."

"If it comes to hanging, where is Laurence?"

"Oh, he has probably lost his Patience," said Jimmy.

"She'll be exhausted," said Cathie, and he grinned.

Margaret asked, rather too hurriedly, if Clement knew the Deykens.

"If you have ever seen the perfect example of superb manhood asking in the city car for a penny one as if he was reciting The Bells, that was our Laurence," said Cathie. "And by the way, this may be difficult; he hasn't looked my road for years."

"No? Because he is married too!"

"I think he'll have to look tonight, even if it is at great personal risk."

"Thank you, Clem; it is something to know that my efforts to be entertaining are appreciated."

"It's not just a matter of appreciation, Cathie. You do this sort of thing . . ." And Jimmy's hands went up the back of his neck and described whirls over his head, ". . . without any warning. It's not entertainment so much as trying it on the dog."

"Who is the dog?" asked Clem.

"Ah-ha! She has always been an ardent vivisectionist. Without being personal, I think in the public interest and as a precaution against fire, Cathie should be made to cover up half an hour after sunset."

"Poor pet! I'll ask Margaret if that is your most vulnerable hour."

But Margaret would not listen.

"Excuse me, but there they are, I believe."

As she left the room Cathie said, "This is the big moment, Clem; this is what we can produce in Forbye. Jimmy, how about some trumpets and a roll of drums?"

"That's an idea; Apollo music!"

He made a quick search in the cabinet for a record.

"And Pan pipes?"

"I haven't brought mine to the party."

"What's all that? Don't say you brought that chanter?"

"Have you heard about it?"

"I'm told there is a witches' sabbath held down the bottom of Maidenhead Gulch. If you're not careful that part will be getting a good name. How is little Sheilie these days?"

"Oh, delightful as ever."

"Taken her to the pictures lately?"

"Don't you be tactless," said Cathie. "Here I am, expecting Clem to see me home, and you are putting up Sheilie Healy to walk between us!"

"She's so thin, Cathie, we won't notice her."

There were voices outside, and Laurence's laugh.

"Cue for soft music, boys."

Margaret was saying, "Jimmy will be so disappointed . . ."

"Bet your life I will; what's the matter now? There . . . didn't I tell you he could not get his Patience to come out!"

Laurence beamed on everyone, and beat two bars to the entry music.

"Not feeling too well, Jimmy; perhaps you'll excuse her tonight. She may stroll round to see her doctor in the morning."

Jimmy made a pantomime with his sleeves, preparing for work.

"At last! And time, you old tipsy man, or may I call you. . . ."

"No, no, no!"

But he clasped his hands high above his head and shook them towards applauding spectators.

"Well," said Jimmy. "I certainly think we might edge towards the drinks. Laurence, you know Cathie. . . ."

"Scarcely; quite a stranger!"

"Quite, Laurence."

"She said a moment ago that you never strained your eyes her way since you have been married."

Margaret winced.

"And Mr. Taverner?"

"Sir! A name that will always have pleasant associations. I am pleased to meet you."

"How d'you do," said Clem.

"Sherry, everyone?"

"Thank you."

"Soft and generous," said Margaret. "As Jimmy likes it."

"What was that remark?" asked Cathie.

"Oh, nothing; I happened to remember something old Ritchie said."

"You tell me that!" Laurence mimicked, and they all laughed.

"I think we might eat now, straight away."

"A splendid idea, Mrs. Muirburn. Shall we lead?"

Cathie rose and took Clem's arm with too perfect grace.

"Trough music, Jimmy, please. And loud!"

"All right, Circe."

"That was a lovely supper, Mrs. Muirburn, if I may say so."

"Seconded," said Clem.

"Do you know what he gets every night at his lodgings? Saps!"

"I do wish you would call it bread and milk; the other sounds so descriptive that it is revolting."

Jimmy chuckled, and stretched himself back from the table in a disgusting exhibition of animal strength.

"So it is. I couldn't go to bed on saps."

Cathie knew he was showing off, wanting her to look at him; he would take half a glance as encouragement. And she watched Margaret instead; Margaret daring her to play up to him, because she wanted so desperately to feel that she had him locked safe and tight in her own heart, that her man was hers alone.

"It was you who sent me to bed on it, with porridge as the alternative."

Jimmy laughed, like a big fool at his own joke, until all the others had to share it, except Margaret who seemed to suspect it had gone beyond diet.

"I did more for you than that; I went to Mrs. Healy and told her if she did not throw away her frying pan I'd crown her with it. I believe I frightened her, when I said she was murdering you slowly and no less certainly than she'd be if she were using arsenic."

"Frightened her! Encouraged her, more likely; she has the old pan sizzling away for her husband, morning noon and night, with something to his every meal. And then she sends out for chips."

"And bottles of lemonade; I know."

"Made right outside the cemetery."

"Cathie, you are disgusting!"

"It's true," said Cathie. "Chips and ginger beer, the food of a mighty race. Today all the oatmeal that escapes being made into toilet soap goes in packet flakes and cakes like granny bakes, for export, so that others may live as we are supposed to, while the clansman on the box is in a fried fish shop shaking vinegar over a poke o' chips."

"The afterbirth of a nation!"

"Jimmy, not at my table, please."

Laurence struggled to bring back tone to the talk.

"There is a strong case for dating the decay of our national strength from the ban on kitchen stills."

"Oh, yes," said Clem. "My brothers were very interested in that idea."

"Splendid things, too. The character was built up as the spirits were put down," said Jimmy.

"Exactly. Kept out the cold; only needed a shirt and kilt and they were ready to face anything, those folk. Ideal clothing, adequate and practical."

"Very," said Jimmy. "Hard to beat."

"I don't believe it," said Cathie.

"We're not thinking of what you are thinking of! Have a brandy?"

"No thanks."

"You won't? There was something Harry gave me the other night . . . I remember thinking, this is Cathie's! Rum and green ginger! I should have got some."

"Not for me, Jimmy."

"What's up? Just because Margaret is foolish about Laurence's theory for dealing with the climate, you need not be. Come on!"

"Jimmy, I'm practically on the wagon, and I'm not getting off."

"Since when?" he persisted.

She laid her napkin on the table, and drew a breath that lifted the green beads, lying where a shadow began at her breasts. Margaret believed it was nice to sup by candlelight, so she lit her table with obscene pale wands with glowing twisted tips, but the light was kind to black and gold and the clearness of her skin.

She looked at her sister and saw the little cutting edge on her smile, inviting her to damn herself; and at the teasing interest in Jimmy's face, until it was wiped away and for one moment before he lowered his eyes they were frightened.

"If I told you, Margaret would not like it."

"Shall we go back to the other room?" said Margaret. "And Laurence, I want you to sing for us, please?"

"With pleasure. But will you not ask Catherine to let us hear her first?"

Cathie smiled.

"You'll be disappointed tonight, Laurence; you see, Margaret is feeling that my accomplishments are rather antisocial."

The rain was off; on the paving stones the moon squandered silver with the street lamp gold. Cathie strolled beside Clement, her hand on his arm, up Main Street after the descent from Slobhill.

Three girls linked arm in arm passed singing on the other side, home from the dancing, their scarves all but falling from their heads.

Ye'll break my heart, ye war-bling bird.

The pleasant young voices came back after them, and the fading sound of their steps lingered in the street.

"Sing, Cathie. Everyone here sings. We ought to be singing on a night like this."

"Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Every minute, after you came."

"You always give exactly the right answer. But how do you like Margaret?"

"Quite a lot, except when she tries to pick at you; even then she does it in a very charming way. What's it all for?"

She shrugged. The singing voices were down by the Cross, almost lost by now.

And left, and left the thorn wi' me.

"This street needs either snow or moonlight, or a soft warm rain. Sunshine gives it away, a dirty down-at-heel drab," she said.

"I used to think it needed a damned good fire."

"Why used?"

He rippled a rain pool with his toe before he answered.

"It's where I first saw you. After that I had something to look for."

"You are an old blether! Tell me, what did you think . . . that she looked a bold strumpet?"

"I thought the sun was breaking through."

"How was that?"

"There's a brightness about you, that's all."

"If you were really to let yourself go, I do believe you could say the most honeyed things to a woman; all the things she likes to hear, at the right time."

"And is this the right time?"

"I can't tell you; my heart stopped long ago."

She supposed that everything they said of her must be true; she must be shameless, to know she was throwing herself at him, or would if only she was quite certain that he would catch. But if he let her fall, if he let her drop at his feet and turned away without giving her his hand, that would break her heart.

"Ye'll break my heart, ye war-bling bird," she sang. "Do you think, Clem, it is worse to have one's heart broken, or one's pride? I believe I could live with a broken heart; there would at least be something sweet and sad and romantic about it. Pride gets hurt, and it has some awful falls, but when it is broken, what have you left?"

"A shell; a copper copper-shell. And you can always sell that as scrap."

She sighed, dolorously.

"I'm afraid you don't take life very seriously."

"Life! What is life?"

"A pain under your pinny!"

"Even when I'm walking you home by moonlight, in your very best frock and all done up to please?"

"And are you pleased?" she said.

"Or ram Mah no'!"

"Well, if you are not, you ought to be. But your accent is rotten; you'll need to do better than that. Can Sheilie not help there?"

He laughed, and she with him, when she remembered what was said about the quickest way to learn the language.

"I'll have to get my lessons on the cheap; perhaps I'll marry a woman of the country."

"You could do worse; present company excepted, of course."

"No of-course about it; why should present company be privileged and protected when there is a border raid on? I am riding. . . ."

"For a fall?"

". . . six white horses. . . ."

"Not all at once?"

"No, darling, one at a time; I have come a very long way. And I wish you would step out of the road before you get knocked down. Where was I?"

"Love, you were riding."

"I am riding into Forbye, shooting and looting and fluting. . . ."

"Ah-ha! No paping nor gaping nor raping?"

"Definitely not. I'm just a simple Sach . . . saccharin in search of a . . ."

"Sweetie?"

Clem groaned. "How did we get started on this?"

"You were walking me home by moonlight, were you not?"

"And thank God, I really am! When I first came along this street it seemed as though I was moving in a nightmare, everything hostile in its coat of dirt or, if that wasn't dingy enough, daubed with admorality grey. Grey grease underfoot, grey skies overhead, and grey faces seeing me as a stranger and hurrying by. It seemed a grey grim world I had dropped into, and now here I am walking through it with you!"

"And where is the difference?"

"There," he said, and pointed to the shadow of the provost's wall, a line that trimmed the light across the pavement as if with shears, where wet footprints turned from mud to silver dust as they walked. "And I'd rather walk home with you than have two gilded lamp posts at my door."

"It is nice to know that two men at least have got what they want."

She looked up at the monstrous birds on their glass panels, their necks about thrawn in their anxiety to see what was going on, dead scared of missing something. They would

see you go by at night, and in the morning they would clype to the provost's wife, that Cathie Mould was out gey late this weather on the arm of her English friend; they had thought she would have learnt her lesson in the past, but no! Evidently when she had the notion of a man she had to go peching after him; not that she need bother that much, for who would want her for keeps?

"His worship, or whatever he may style himself, may have achieved his pet ambition when they gave him these totems at his front gate," Clem was saying. "Some men have simple tastes; dress them in a funny hat, or a pair of silk knee breeches, hang something around their necks, other than a rope, put anything in their hand so long as it is not a shovel or a rifle. . . ."

"Or a nail."

"Exactly, for where's the glory in a rusty nail, used over and over again for the sake of economy? Give a man those things that can make him feel a little bit superior to the others around him, and then he's happy; he is a person to point out to your children as an example of what can be done with life."

He had stopped where the blocks of the carriage entrance crossed the sidewalk between the lamps and was gazing up at them. Folk who were passing smiled, seeing him rendering to the town the respect due to it. They did well for their public men in Forbye; he would be able to tell a thing or two when he went to his home, how the poorest could rise to sit among the best in the land. And what if the faces of their own kind did get a bit bashed in the scramble, they would smile with pride again when they saw their Jamie astride their necks.

Cathie pulled at his arm, to bring him back to her.

"You are sneering at us. But that is what we have been brought up to. Down your way you read your Cinderella stories; here we see them illustrated every time we go down the street, success living on the hill, and failure nice and neighbourly with the fairies at the bottom of the garden; plenty up at Slobhill and poverty down in the Spoutmouth, and the children coming out of school run their own ways home to both. We say we are a democratic country, when all we really are is apathetic. We have dulled our perception of inequality by living among it, and our conscience by calling

it the will of God; we have found nobility in other folk's service and dignity in their labour; we have given the century to the common man and kept the loot for ourselves, and we talk about Jock being as good as his master until there is a share-out, and then it is I'm all right, bother you!"

Clem put his hand on hers, where it lay on his arm.

"You talk as though you feel it."

She laughed, with a tiny stab in her heart that he should think her senseless.

"No, I don't feel. It is Margaret who feels; she told me so tonight. Emotionally, she is a quivering nerve, sensitive to the point of agony; it will not be very long before she confides in you that she literally lives on her feelings. . . ."

"I wondered what she had done with them."

". . . and she will probably tell you, if you don't make unkind remarks like that to her, that she finds you a very understanding person."

"And shall I have to appreciate that?"

"Oh yes! Money can get you into Slobhill, but you have to be an understanding person if you want to get in with Margaret."

Clem murmured that if it had to be so connubial he would rather he was allowed to choose, and anyway, wouldn't the doctor mind?

"Shut up," said Cathie. "You know how hard it is to find any bed here, without your being choosy where you kip in. And I was explaining about Margaret."

Margaret rather prided herself upon her collection of understanding persons. Where other women collected horse brasses, or Crown Derby, or Doulton ducks, Margaret gathered around her understanding persons. She called them persons because the basis of the understanding was platonic; you admired Jimmy but did not run after him—and that was why Cathie was ruled out—and if you ran after Margaret as well as admired her, it had to be done in the very nicest way, without ever mentioning or doing anything about it; similarly, they were non-sectarian, which meant that if they went to any place of worship it was to the High Church, and no understanding person took any interest in politics nor ever criticised the upper class, and of course having money did not matter. No one was very sure what in her opinion

counted as understanding, but it was very certain that you were dropped out of the collection as soon as you showed that you understood Margaret. Laurence Deyken had shone among her persons for as long as any; Cathie did not doubt that there were some things he understood very well indeed, but she did not think Margaret knew of them or he would have been dropped long ago. Neither had she seen the wealth of understanding in Patience's eyes whenever they turned on Jimmy, or she would have been down too. Skeil Newous had been very understanding until the *Fugleman* had taken paragraphs of his titled *Nightshirt v. Nightshift* and she had heard Jimmy say that he thought Skeil was trying to pull one over him, so he was dropped. She had taken up Austerne Kniblochie and dusted him very carefully whenever she had him out, until once he had said he would like to cast her for the Madonna in *The Miracle* and she had talked a lot about it, which made someone ask if she had studied the part, and as soon as she had taken a peep at the first two acts, down went poor Austerne. Of course most of the family had been dropped long ago, not that they had ever been numbered among the understanding persons, because they had not, not even Davie who seemed to understand folk without any fuss and always acted as though being human was the only introduction necessary to his house. For to be human was little short of an offence against the person in the eyes of Slobhill.

"So when Margaret says that of you, you know she has put you through your paces and feels you are all right on the things that matter, such as not calling a spade a spade, nor a napkin a serviette; she is fairly sure that you'll not eat mince with a knife nor potato crisps with a fork; that you will leave the last button of your vest undone, but never any others, and . . ."

"And never, never do anything ungentlemanly, like blowing bubbles through my bath-water or sleeping in my shirt. The only thing I can't understand," said Clem, "Is what the flicking hell it has to do with her!"

"Hush, Clem, do you want to be dropped?"

"If I were made of rubber, from her height I wouldn't even bounce."

Cathie began to sing again, the same line threatening to break her heart.

"Here, I'm a bright one! Why, I have walked you right up the street instead of taking the tram."

"Oh, Clem, don't say you haven't enjoyed it, because I have, so much! Won't you come in?"

He still had her hand in his, as they stood within the gates.

"I'd rather not. I want to keep other folk from crowding you up in my mind, because for a whole week I shall be walking home with you."

Her fingers caressed the back of his hand, as it held her other.

"Shan't we both be terribly footsore by next Sunday?"

"Too tired for the hills?" he asked.

"Never too tired for anywhere, if you come around for me."

Her eyes laughed, even while her heart beat heavily . . . Monday, Tuesday, five days and then perhaps Saturday.

"I love it when you smile, but I do wish you would take me seriously, sometimes," he said.

"Do you?" She fondled the words she spoke to him; her lips longed to touch his cheek, to keep him safe for her until she could see him again. "Well, let me warn you, darling . . . you be very careful or you may get swallowed up in one big gulp by a bad, bad woman!"

"With hair like a shower of new coppers?"

"And a past, don't forget."

"I only remember her presence."

"You're not frightened!" she said. "Good-night, dear."

And she drew her hand away, making a move to leave him.

"Good-night, Cathie; till next week," he called after her.

"I'll be waiting. Bye-bye."

He stayed in the shadow of the gatepost, looking after her, but she did not turn to wave. He heard her singing again from the drive where it curved behind the trees to their front door, too low for him to hear the words but only the air; the moonlight and her spell over him put them in his mind.

*And my fa'se lov-er stole the rose, but
Left, but left the thorn wi' me.*

CHAPTER XIII

DOWN at home he had run around with all the girls; all the right girls, as his mother had called them, and one or two others unknown to her, who might not have been so suitable in her opinion, socially, but who had by far the sweeter natures, and he had been much more fond of them. They had been girls from the best schools, who could play tennis and talk about a horse or do things with dogs; some were even clever with their needle, and a few were home girls, handy to their mother in the house; they could knock up little snixie-bits in the kitchen. They were nice girls, their heads screwed on till the threads were well-nigh stripped, and they hunted only in the pack because there were not enough eligible men to go round; some were dying to get married, and they looked at you encouragingly if they had decided that you might do at a pinch. It was any man for his pelf, and nothing barred but surrender; they were pledged to resist to the altar rails but they used the best gaffs and were set to drag him there by the hair if he would not go quietly. If Clement had had just a shade better prospects, or been a lot better looking, he would never have been allowed to get away.

Among them, once in a while, there had been a girl worth kissing good-bye, who made him feel that his heart had brpken. But they had been no more than girls, while Catherine Mould was a woman, with far more to reckon with than years, for many could have given her them. When he was with her she was not worrying about his intentions, nor caring if he had none; it would have been all one to her if they had been dishonourable, for she was no longer playing—she had her birlies up, as the children called at touch. She had played that game once, and after she had seen that he knew, said little about it, as if he would understand. As Mrs. Healy said, she was one who had the sense, because it was not worth a candle, and now everything was fine and dandy; you could take her as she was or go your own gait. Life was enough for Cathie; she had gone about tasting it and

found quite a bit to her liking; she had sown her wild oats and to look at her a man would think she was pleased with the crop, and she had brushed off the dust and hung up her fiddle in the seed-shed.

With Sunday afternoon and no rain Clem rang at the Moulds' door and waited on the polished tiles of the vestibule. It was Mary who answered.

"Good afternoon. I'm Clem Taverner; I hope Miss Catherine Mould is expecting me?"

She closed the inner door behind her, and pointed to the slate bench along one wall.

"Yes, she is. Do sit down. It's far nicer for her when you call than when you let her go out to hunt for you."

"I suppose so," he said. "You might have told me this before."

"So I should, but Cathie's fussy, in her own way."

"More shy, perhaps?"

"But it is so silly to be shy. There's Margaret . . . Jimmy would never have married her if she had been shy, because while Cathie was about he always flirted with her. But as soon as she had gone away, he switched over to our Margaret, and Daddy said she had the engagement out in the *Fugleman* before poor Jimmy had time to collect his wits. And that's how I shall get my man, later on; because Daddy says a man can't be expected to know what is best for him, but a woman gets guidance from her heart."

"I see," said Clem, rather stunned by his ears and chilled by the slate. "And do you think that is reliable?"

"It is some help, at least; and that's more than you can say about one's eyes. I mean, look at you . . . you are nothing very much to look at. Oh, I shouldn't have said that, should I? But you know what I mean . . ."

"Your sister Margaret feels I'm an understanding person."

"She would! I meant that Cathie likes you an awful lot, and I like you too; and that must be only because we feel we're friends."

"And friends are better than understanding persons? You're right!"

"Yes; but I was going to tell you that Harry Royal is

much better looking than you, and his granny has pots of money, although she is a horrid old thing, and for these weeks past he has been making a dead set at Cathie. You see, he thinks he's in love with her, but she says it's not that at all. And Cathie will know."

He nodded, looking at the earnest young face, fuller than Cathie's, and seeing a hint of Cathie's fire damped down in her hair.

"I'm very glad she does," he said.

"You would not mention it to anyone?"

"Never. And does your own heart give you this inside information about folk, about the men you know?"

She considered whether to answer or not.

"Of course, there is time enough for that. But I may see one and think, No, 'Mighty no! and another time perhaps I might say, Maybe! Though I am in no hurry, unless someone else goes after my bonny."

"Then you have got him in mind?"

"You would never tell anyone, except of course Cathie?"

He wondered at the exception, but agreed. "I don't suppose she would mention your confidences to me."

"I doubt she might, when she gets really fond of you, but never mind," Mary said. She got up, hearing her name called in the house. "Do you know Upper Jenny's?"

"Where Cathie goes for the eggs?"

"The same, only that is something new. Well, Jock Glee's there, is an awful fine boy."

From inside they heard running steps down the stairs. She put out her hand to hold the door.

"I'll look out for him," he promised.

"Mary!"

Cathie was calling.

She tugged at the handle for a moment to detain her.

"Not a word, mind now!"

"I'm an oyster," he said, and got up as Cathie was let out.

"Mary! How long have you been kept here, Clem?"

"We've been talking," he said. "As man to man."

"Is this you stealing my laddie?"

Mary was scornful.

"Who do you take me for? You go right ahead, honey!"

"I'm afraid you're very rude." Cathie was the big sister.

"When I was your age I would never have dared to behave like you do."

"And when I am your age," said Mary, hitting below the belt, but gently, "I won't dare to behave as you have done!"

He laughed. "But wouldn't you like to!"

Cathie hurried him away.

"Oh, don't you encourage her, now. She doesn't need it."

Cathie said it would break the gossips' hearts if they could see the pair of them walking so dourly along the smooth footpaths on either side of the old railway leading out to the moors, one for each, with the full width of the shale ballast between them. Up the banks of the track were briars brilliant with scarlet hips; it seemed all wrong that the rose, the emblem of England, should bloom more sweetly, twice as fine and colourful, on these charnel fields of industry than on the sheltered lanes of Wellow. To walk through them in the quiet silence of the cuttings, and on the shrubbed embankments, and to see how smooth were the paths and how tight-packed their surface, set Clem wondering if they were trodden so heavily by the tired feet of child labourers, and what had become of the men, that the very grass was ashamed to hide the trace of their steps, for not another living soul did they ever meet out that way. The uncut hawthorns were green between fields cocked with hay; over them the plovers circled, never weary, then plunged earthwards in a crazy game, only to wheel up again in their old interminable play.

Over the hills the sky, where it was blue, was pale and the clouds soft and vague; the light had changed, the very air told that now or never it was high summer. Far down in the valley white billows of engine steam were climbing in the sunlight, becoming like marble statuary, vast buttocks dazzling white and blue shadowed loins.

"Have you not brought the chanter?"

"Yes, but I can get damn-all out of the thing." "

"Here, give it me; shall I try?" She held out her hand.

"Come and sit nearer to me, Clem; you seem so far away."

He passed it over and, glad enough, did as she said.

"Do you folk here always have to be making a row . . . whistling, singing or worse?"

"We do; otherwise we might start to think."

She blew a few notes, and then tried a scale.

"I believe you could play that; it's more than I ever shall."

"Maybe my great-granny crossed the path of a piper. Did I ever tell you that they slung me out of the Forbye ladies band?"

"No! Were you as good as that?"

"I was as bad as that! Let's try . . . Broken bridge is falling down."

She hummed the tune, then put the chanter to her lips and began to pick it out.

*What'll you give to set her free, set her free, set her free?
What'll you give to set her free, my fair lady?*

"You don't mind me playing your pipe? I haven't got tee-bee, or anything!"

"I never thought you had. You play away, I'm not fikey where you're concerned."

It was a wonder, because he was absurdly fussy over things like that; he hated tearoom cups and pub glasses, always looked for egg between the prongs of a fork, and at school he would not have put another boy's whistle to his mouth. He did not care to use other folk's things, and he resented their using his.

He looked at her, as she sat so near to him that he could see how fine the skin was on her cheek, and how the freckles were sifted on her brow and nose, the nutmeg on junket.

"Why do you look at me?"

"I was thinking you are wonderfully sweet and wholesome."

"So I am. Jimmy Muirburn always said I have a wonderful physique."

"Is that when he was speaking as the doctor or the brother-in-law?"

"Oh, it is just Jimmy speaking, Margaret's white headed boy; and it is no good you expecting to see a medical look in his eye!"

"Perhaps that is why they pack his surgery. I've been up once or twice, and it has always been a full house. And he doesn't waste any time on them—Ting! and the next, and Ting! again, you're belled away."

"Isn't it a scream? And to hear it from the waiting room he might be typing instead of tending all the ills the flesh is heir to; heaven knows, around here we seem to have inherited the lot. Yet, you know, if he is really needed, there is nothing he wouldn't do for any one of them."

"I've heard that."

"From the Healys, and down at the Cross? They talk about him, don't they?"

"Is there anyone they don't talk about? What else is there to do?"

"Little enough."

"Except put out the light and go to bed."

He did not think she had meant to laugh, but when she did, he smiled.

"Did you know that is the local joke?" she said. "There's that, and little forbye. And you can see what it does for us; look at my daddy, all his life he has been preaching, Early to bed . . ."

"He certainly looks happy and wise, and if that is the recipe for being as spry as he is at his age, I'd take a chance on the wealth."

She gave a tune on the pipe; her fingers were graceful, the nails rose and white against the black wood.

"We were saying there was little to do in Forbye," she said.

"I got down to taking Sheilie Healy out, and being glad of her company."

"You could have done much worse. Has she taken you down to her end of the town?"

"No. Her mother said she would be just like a sister to me, and I left it at that. Sisters are much easier to live with, and ever so much cheaper; you know what Mr. Patmore said:

*A gentlewoman's twice as cheap,
As well as pleasanter to keep."*

"But rather insipid, perhaps," she said.

Away to the south was the road he took to the factory, it looked flat enough from here, the brae where the bus laboured every morning; and over on the further side the left fork swept beyond the hills and down to home. He wondered

what his mother would make of Sheilie, and then quite suddenly he realised that he had never wondered what she would think of Catherine. But then she would never know about her, nothing more beyond what he chose to tell.

"I like Sheilie, anyhow," he said. "I don't care what they say."

"I have noticed that; I mean, that you take folk as you find them. Up here, you know, we pride ourselves on doing that, and we say that you in the south do not; you had it from Jimmy the other night. All it amounts to in a general way is that if we come across someone we don't know, we'll talk to him until we find out all about him; and down there, you find out what you can, and until then you wouldn't be seen dead in the ditch with him, let alone talking."

"If it has to come to being seen in ditches, I don't know about Sheilie. But would you be seen in the pictures with me?"

"Ask me."

"I most certainly shall. What do you like . . . nature films? The strong forbidden passion stuff?"

"Nature films, if that is the choice. Oh, you're being funny! If you want the truth, Clem, it would not matter; and I'd just as soon go wandering about with you, like here today. I like you; you're a bit different from so many. Often they seem to think that I'm not fastidious, that they can start in straight away with making love to me, as if I had no ideas of my own."

He grinned; at heart he was not very different, merely less adventurous. And when she saw, she turned a shoulder to him, sorry perhaps for speaking.

"Would it shatter anything too precious if I told you that I've often thought you would be good fun to make love to? Nothing venture, nothing win, they say; I should need to be half-dead not to think it might be worth the risk. Give me time; don't hurry me, and I'll do my best."

"I don't know yet quite how to take you, but I have told you that I'm not making the mistake of heeding you." She shifted, so that she could look at him, and he saw how green her eyes were when there was blue in the sky. "I don't know a thing about you, beyond the little you've told me. Have you not a sweetheart somewhere?"

"No."

"Mother's boy?"

"Not specially; there are three of us, you know."

"You think a lot of your mother, and your home, that kind of thing, don't you? You feel it is all better than anything we have up here?"

"Be fair; qualify it, and say it seems better to me. I'd like you to see my home, Cathie."

There was a silence between them; and then she said, "Do you mean that?"

"Of course I mean it."

"How could you introduce me to your mother?"

"As Cathie Slaughter, the undertaker's daughter. You would knock 'em cold!"

"I see," she said, although she did not quite. Of course, he would find out later that although you often went to a girl's home in Forbye, if you took her into yours it was tacitly understood that there was something between you. "And your mother would lift her eyebrows when she heard of the woman her son was kicking about with."

"Oh, they would go up very high indeed, if she only heard. But once she had met you, she would feel as I do, that it is nobody's business. You see, my mother has brought us up with very great stress on what are the right and wrong friends to make; and she has tremendous confidence in her early training."

Cathie thought about it, taking her time. The wind blew her hair forward about her face, like jonquil petals in an April gale.

"Clem, that was rather a sweet compliment. If you were to ask me, the next time you go home, I'd come with you. Understand though, I mean straight to your home."

"Is that a promise?"

"Aye, it is a promise; you ask me. But don't say anything about it, because, funnily enough, folk around Forbye make their thought their story."

"Cheers!"

He was pleased with himself, as if he had taken on something dangerous, that no one would ever have believed he could do, and got away with it.

"A bargain like that ought to be pledged, or something; kiss me, Cathie!"

"No, I don't want to." She stood up, meaning it, and began tucking away the strayed curls. "It ought to be pledged, but I don't want you to kiss me. I want to wait until your mother has kissed me; at least," she added, and smiled at her own truthfulness, "I am going to try to wait."

He got up, ruefully; but she had put him off very gently. If he had not asked, she might have thought him cissy.

"By gum, Mum, my bum's numb!"

She laughed. "And that's not all. You've never even said if you liked my hair!"

"Liked it! I'm drawn to it; it's the sunniest prospect in this land of pneumonia. Haven't you seen that I grow towards you like a flower?"

"A big pansy?"

"Say a red-hot poker! But I meant the first part; since I've seen you around there's been light in my world."

"Imagine! I believe you are trying to charm me, but it's better than being called green ginger! And you tell me you have no sweetheart? Wait, if you have a knife you can cut off this wee bit, just as a keepsake; a glimmer in the Celtic twilight!"

It was won from the strand without disgracing the edge of the blade, and laid carefully away before the wind could rob him.

"That is my favour," she said.

"I'll keep it bright."

And she took his hand to start him walking, or he would have tried again to get that kiss.

"Come on; who goes home? Time all wild flowers were asleep."

*Water water wild-flower, growing up so high
We are all children and we must surely die;
Excepting little Cathie Mould, the youngest of us all,
She can dance and she can sing and she can knock us all down.*

The children sang as they played in the builder's yard. For as long as any could remember, there had been children playing in front of the Moulds' workshops; the same games and the same songs, and it seemed the same voices; only

their names had changed. They had come tumbling in at the gates fast enough in the old days, Wattie McQuart said, a birn of weans enough to deafen you, but Davie had gone around blethering about a full quiver and being blessed by the Lord, and you hardly noticed those others who drifted in with the crowd to take up the play. After all his own save Mary had grown up or were out further afield there were still games in the yard, the men were so used to it that they would not think to shoo them out more than once in a while, and by that time the youngsters were coming into town to see their granny, so that when young Cathie was on enough to be taken by the hand, she would toddle out with them to find the playground that was theirs now by ancient right.

All Forbye was waiting for the fair; they made the holiday in mid-July, along with Glassford, and, it was said, one week after the summer, which had been filched from them by the pie-eating folk on the east coast. It was then that the tools clattered down in and around Forbye, the big break of the year, except with the miners of Chotts, where they stopped so often that the *Fugleman* made news of it any time they went back to work; not that Clem blamed them for that, he would not have gone down into those rat holes for twice the salary his department paid him for sitting safe on his backside in his light and comfortable office.

From the window he was watching rain on the roof below him run hurrying to the brimful gutters. Along the diagonal slope of the cement tiles drops darted in a pulse of light, beating out time before his eyes, steady for a while, then faster, now slow as the drip of congealing blood. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday . . . July, June, May, April, the months had gone like that; he could count them back as the drips fell, the months he had known Cathie, until now he was taking her home with him to Wellow.

As the calendar told him of summer days Clem had sat in his office thinking that at home they would be pronging the oats and peas up on to the heavy wains in all the heat of the day. Sometimes in the factory it was too hot, and in the later afternoon he watched the girls' faces melting like wax and sagging with fatigue; he could remember when his own muscles had tired, when dust and chaff were sticking to his

sweat, but then it had been fine to feel your shirt cooling in the evening air, and the levelling sunlight pouring red on the neighbouring wheat, a flood of gold.

Around Forbye they raked the sodden mass that was their hay crop into drenched hives in the already greening fields, and left it there to dry, as if in the hope of shaming the Almighty. Only to look at it was to set him longing for the heat that came from the brick walls at home, when he went down the garden to see if plums had ripened during the day, the heat that came to meet him on the path and touched his cheek like a caress, as if it had been waiting, and almost lost hope of his coming. And he longed again for the peace of home, for the late step in the lane and 'Good-night' cried across the gate, and elms in the hedgerows and the willow bed by the river. He longed for fields where the barley was white and streamed in the wind like a girl's hair, and for kind brown faces bent over the scarlet beans, for the jugs of tea brought out from the farm, making the sweat run like juices from the roast, and the bottled beer cool in the ditch, with a thirst coming from the very thought of it.

How far away Forbye seemed from the bikes overlying each other outside the doors of the *Half Brick* at evening, with the scrape of guards and the ting of a bell announcing a late comer, and the drift in two's and three's around to the back—you would be all right until you saw another trot out and then of a sudden you were bursting. It was in the evenings they went to the pub at home, during the day unless they were on the road they did not need it; but it was good to think of it, there in the early afternoon, with perhaps a tinker's barrow pulled up at the side and him in the shade of the wall, the pony held by one hand and a glass tankard in the other, his face as brown and winking as the ale, and folk in the bus for the town looking out at him, envious mostly though sometimes one here and there unapproving, and the heat shining their faces as though they had been down before the oven, and a thirst in their throats gulping as their mouths watered.

Mrs. Healy told him that by now it was generally taken for granted in the town that Cathie was his girl. This, she said,

was because if she was out with anyone it seemed to be him and, in spite of all that was known about her, never for long enough back had they known her to go with a fellow until she had got so friendly with Clem.

"And since my other three girls are happily married, and Sheilie, good girl though she is, would not be quite suitable, with you being outside her religion and all, there is not one in the town I could have found better for you, if you had asked me to do your choosing."

Clement said he would have asked her, if he had known then where she would have made her choice, and yet by her drawing his attention to Cathie's grace and goodness whenever she had been mentioned, he did feel that he had been prodded in the right direction. And if she would be so kind as to work now from the other side, and give him a fair character to Cathie—as a man with whom she could almost trust her own daughter—then he would indeed be very grateful to her. In the meantime, although he was quite sure she was the only girl for him, he thought that perhaps Cathie herself would rather they were just good friends.

"Not with that hair, she will no'," said Mrs. Healy. "But it is to be a golden ring or nothing at all for Cathie this time; and who can blame her?"

And so the children sang at their play, two of the bigger girls with hands linked for the bridge, and the chain threading under and round again until the prisoner was taken.

A golden ring to set her free, my fair lady.

Clem thought that if the town had it already, he owed it to Mr. and Mrs. Mould to see they knew about it, and the very next time he had called for Cathie he had thought that they must have felt the same, for Isa showed him straight to the sitting room where they were by themselves.

"And how are you keeping this weather?" asked Davie as he drew him in a chair.

"Fairly sound," said Clem, and wished he had not, because at once he remembered that to Davie it was almost shop, and came perilously near to inviting him to screw him down. "And you, and Mrs. Mould?"

"We cannot complain, for a couple of oldsters, you know,

Mr. Taverner. Of course, we have young company, and they won't let us get too sedate."

Clem said, "My own parents make the same complaint, but they like it; and we are another happy family, although there are only the five of us . . . well, six now, for we can't leave my brother's wife outside."

"And that's true," said Davie. "The family is a good thing, and the clan is a better. In these days the clans have dropped some of their little jealousies to make the nation, and maybe nations will do the same when we see clearly and far enough."

"I agree," said Clem, and was almost starting on the subject when he saw Mrs. Mould wished to speak.

"Cathie should be down in a minute, so don't let Mr. Mould get on any of his hobby horses. She told us you would be coming around."

"Yes," said Clem, and he took a deep breath. He was burning his boats and they were not covered by insurance. "I want to ask you if you have any objection to her going home with me at the fair. I would like her to meet my mother."

He saw Davie look at his wife, his face beaming, well-shaved in parts, as if he had found a florin.

"Cathie did say you had mentioned it . . . just to us, of course," she said. "It would be a nice change for her; what do you think, David?"

Davie looked at him straight and square.

"I am quite easy about it; Cathie is wise enough to look after herself. Oh, aye, if she wants to go home with you, and you feel you would like her to see your own folk, I'm not going to keep you as strangers. Good luck to you both . . . eh, Jessie?"

"Yes; Cathie is very sensible." She smiled, hoping perhaps that he would understand. "It is only that I do like to know."

"And I won't leave you guessing," said Clem, watching the flames going up, without any regrets. "I'm very fond of Catherine, but I do feel I am a stranger to her yet."

"Never mind," said Davie. "That is easily remedied. And in this house we talk about you as an old friend. But I would not say that we need to go crying this all over the Cross."

And he agreed; others would be doing that for them, soon enough, once the holiday had started.

Clem locked his office early, and left the department to ring the phone hoarse if it wished to, and went straight to the city terminus. Cathie came through from her work and met him at the train. When he saw her coming he was pleased that out of all the crowd she was searching for him, because from them he could not have picked one who to him would have looked so good.

She stirred the warm ashes of his boats.

"It's not too late, Clem; tell me now, if you are afraid they'll not like me."

"But I know everyone will. And if they don't, it won't matter, because I love you."

"I'm very glad of that; I can certainly face quite a lot, now you tell me that!"

It seemed a way they had with each other, saying fond things as if they were only repeating the obvious, and then turning it to a joke before they were swept out of their depth.

CHAPTER XIV

THEY waited until the taxi came down from the village, and talked by the booking office door about the weather, about one or two folk around and the weather again, although it had not altered between times. Cathie said nothing, beyond how clean everything was, almost as if it had been washed down, station and all, that very morning; Clem said it had been, they knew she was coming.

She looked out at the lane when she could; for most of their way the banks seemed to be eager to peep in at her, deep in flowery weed and bracken fronds and warm sleepy grass. When they could see ahead there were the elms beside the road, their branches trying to meet across; and he remembered the tram standards of Forbye as they would be now on Main Street, the grey mud on the pavements instead of this stream that always went wandering down the lane looking for company and a short cut to the marshes.

"Did you not say there would be sunshine?"

"Isn't there?"

He had not seen until then that across the fields low clouds were trailing their skirts, and the distance was hazy as the top of the brae as you left the Cross.

"It seemed bright to me. Do you miss anything?"

"Bings! What do the folk do here, or are there none?"

"They farm; that is, they stand around and talk, complaining of all there is waiting to be done, if the weather would only let them get at it. No one has tuppence to rub together and they reckon they are the most hard-done-by folk on earth."

"I'm going to try for a farmer!"

"Then talk it over with Mother; see who she can recommend."

The morning sky was streaked with thin cloud, sharp-edged as though a child had been drawing on the windows of heaven. From his pillow Clement lay watching it, and

heard the clatter of milking from the byres; he thought of his resolve to be up at the others' rising time and out helping. It seemed too late now, and hardly worth admitting to have slept in, when nothing was likely to save him from being accused of laziness. Better to plead guilty and throw himself on the mercy of the court. That would be Mother about the house, moving quietly so as not to disturb him and setting every floor board off in agonised squeaks; she would be making tea, and in a few minutes she would come to his room; very softly in case he was asleep, and tell him she had not meant to disturb him but just thought he would like a cup. It would have been more fitting if he had been taking her the tray, but he believed she would have considered it as almost a ritual desecrated, for coming home in these days put him in a category part way between a guest and a prodigal son, and which in her mind called for a special course of sleep and building up . . . in fact, for *Man-Power*.

He heard the stairs creaking as she came up; torturing them would not have wrung out a more complete betrayal. She was tapping softly as a robin on a window, and then going in to Cathie. No voices; perhaps she was sleeping still. The door was being closed so quietly that she must be; only the catch would wake her, it always leapt home like a rifle bolt. You could not do any clandestine prowling in this house, the boys would be shouting to you to hurry up and jump into bed with her and let them all have some sleep.

Prang!

Are you right there? Right! Prang-prang!

"Don't you wake up yet, Clem dear; but I thought you would like some tea."

"I would; thanks, Mother. How are you this morning?"

"I didn't rest very well; excited, perhaps. How did you sleep?"

"With my eyes shut, darling."

"Were you warm enough?"

"Quite; I took off one blanket and put back the eiderdown. Oh, my blessed, teapot and all! Are you having a cup with me?"

She was pouring it out.

"I brought it for Cathie, thinking you might like to have gone in to see her. But she is asleep, like a sensible child."

"That's good, because I don't think she would be expecting me to do that."

"Oh; I thought I was being helpful."

"So you are, Mother. But . . . of course, perhaps I'm wrong. As a young woman, what would you have felt about it?"

"I'm afraid I can't remember quite so far back as that!"

"Speak the truth and shame the devil. She's asleep, anyway."

He sipped the tea.

"What does she look like asleep?"

"I didn't stand staring at her."

Perhaps she was worrying lest his question came from an evil curiosity that her next words would either excite or allay; mothers find so many responsibilities.

"I thought her hair was like embroidery on the pillow."

Golden-bronze dragons asleep beside her white temples, their curling tails among the hills, the mountains of spices at sunrise.

"You didn't kiss her good-morning, I suppose?"

"Should I have? I wouldn't like her to think I was too demonstrative."

"I was wondering if you would feel that; up there they say we are insincere, you know. Why not take her in the tea now; that door catch would waken the seven sleepers."

"Oh, I do hope not."

She went to the dressing-table and arranged the quilted silk around her neck, and her hair, bunched neatly by the one ribbon.

"Your mother feels old beside her boys' young wives and sweethearts."

"Then she is holding her own not too badly; if the boys have anything like you drifting around the house when they are Dad's age they'll not complain. Go in and show Cathie the secret of England's greatness . . . early morning tea; mother's brewin'."

"Don't you think, Clem, you should be a wee bit . . . there, I've got it now . . . a shade more adult than you are? With a lovely girl just across the landing!"

"On you go, and none of your wicked ideas; there is plenty of time for my adultery!"

"Clement, dear!"

And she went out of his room, in a gentle lavender-scented confusion.

She had always played mother beautifully, and loved the part; one of the sweet quiet women who had stocked the playing fields of Eton. To her family she felt she owed a picture of herself with gloved hands in the rose garden, before the sun was too hot; shrinking from coarseness and on guard against all that was common; loving flowers, and with no more definite sex interests than pollinating the vegetable marrows. It had been an exhilarating discovery, years ago when a girlhood friend had been visiting and through the open doors and windows of the man-free house came peals of his mother's laughter, to hear her begging with tears in her voice, Oh, Puss, you naughty Puss! Do you know any more?

Cathie by this time must have realised that tea-taking was expected of her, for she sounded well awake and able to assure his mother that she had slept very well, that she had ample bedclothes and she like the window to be open, and that it did not matter in the least that it had jambed. No, please not to bother Clem about it; she could dress quite well with it on this lovely morning and the cows would not mind; it would not be anything very new or startling even if someone did happen to see her brushing her hair.

"Clem," his mother called. "Cathie's window has stuck. You had better come and do something. Put on your dressing-gown."

"'Mighty! 'Mighty! Don't go in your nightie!"

Put on your dressing-gown! Like the *matinée* idol in the married-love scene; just in case he got carried away by his part. Ah, well, Mother always said every man should see his girl first thing in the morning before he decided to marry her; a difficult and even shady business to arrange, as they had pointed out, and she was vague when asked if their father had acted upon similar advice many times before finding the benefit. So this would be her showing Cathie up, to be on the safe side, seeing that he did nothing with his eyes shut, and always took a lantern to his courting.

There might be another drop in the pot, so he took his cup along.

"Is this done in Forbye?"

Mother's eyes said it was all right while she was there, she would take care of him; and he was afraid she would.

"Clement has always been the shy one."

Surely she knew there was no bigger menace, that countless women were lost to shy men, and virgins without number? And Cathie would be laughing up her sleeve, if she had had any. Not that anyone could say her nightie aimed at seduction; it was not one of those things you could spit peas through, but simple and no nonsense, or perhaps only a very little.

"Clem, would you mind handing me the box from that table; it is something I brought for your mother."

He watched her open it to discover the graceful bottle of lavender water.

"But my dear Cathie, you should never have done this! How did you know that it is the only perfume I ever use?"

Cathie laughed, pleased that she was so easily charmed. For a moment he fancied she was to be kissed as she was thanked, but she looked away just when she should have turned to his mother.

"I risked it. Has he not told you that I work in a beauty parlour?"

"My dear, he has told me absolutely nothing!"

And all the time his mother's face was saying that now everything was explained, as she tried hard to keep her eyes off Cathie's hair.

"Oh, yes. You see, we are a big family and we all had to go out to do something. And of course I am lucky, because so many come to the shop thinking the firm has done my hair for me, and so they have always been very good to me, wherever I worked. It is rather amusing, when, as you probably know, my father is an undertaker, or as we say, a funeral director."

That was Cathie filling in her background; she could not stand out alone by herself, any more than Margaret Muirburn could do, but she must bring Forbye well up and focus on the details. Only unlike Margaret, she must always light up the facts, instead of dressing and arranging them to suit herself. He could see his mother trying to fit Cathie as she saw her into a framework of coffins and hearses and black crepe, with Davie in his lum hat thriving while others wept, and she was finding it as inconsistent as he would himself if he had not known Davie.

"An undertaker! Oh, darling, you make me shiver; someone stepping on my grave. Come, let's all get dressed, and the boys will be glad of your help later on, Clem. And we'll only talk of cheerful things today."

All the week they had talked happily. Within the household, Cathie marvelled to see how Mrs. Taverner moved with the sun, finding shade from the heat and yet avoiding the shadows that might have chilled her.

The three women were taking tea in the cool of the house, with the long windows fully opened on to the garden, where there was so much to be done among the overgrown riot of flowers and grass that no one had ever troubled for weeks past. The men were busy with the harvest; sounds of work came in with the murmur of bees, the drone of the tractors from far away and a hurried roar as one pulled in a load to the stack yard, drowning the light throb of the elevator engine, or the rattle of a wagon and the carter crying to his team.

For Cathie it was another world. Main Street and the Cross were as if she had dreamed of them, her home was some place she had known long ago; in the few days she had seen Clem change under the warm sun, strength and colour came into his face as his lungs rid themselves of the factory taint, and mirrors told her plainly enough that she herself was like a plant taken out from a dark shed into daylight. She knew that while here they were drenched in summer heat, in Forbye you would know the sun was in the sky above the town by faith alone, the evidence of things unseen, more than anything you saw of it through the smoky rain; the town would be itself, with a grey sweat on its stones, a drip of moisture on every twig and ledge, the same as ever. She knew now why Clem despised the streets she came from, now she had seen his summer lanes; and they were as he had told her they would be, lanes where a wet day brought only dark patches between the dusty margins beneath the elms, and the scent of limes; and rain meant only tiny craters pitting the dust; the sound of aspen leaves stirring in a sigh of wind.

"Cathie is so quiet, I wonder what she's thinking of," said Mrs. Taverner.

"Oh, I am sorry; I was dreaming right enough."

"I expect she's in love; she ought to be, for the weather is certainly in love with her."

"Yes, I ought to be. But it does not always happen that way."

She smiled at her, sorry almost that she could not pretend to be the young girl Clem was expected to bring into the family.

"Never mind; such wonderful things can happen."

The ageing woman-eyes looked at them both, seeing them perhaps as the good ground, her sons the sowers forth sowing Taverner seed, and not thinking just now of any falling by the wayside.

"She longs for grandchildren; I suppose your parents are the same?"

Cathie was nibbling the heart of a lettuce, its crispness a delight to her, but she laid it down as her pulse quickened, and she looked out into the walled garden as if in the next few moments she might be turned from it.

"My brothers have their families, although they are very scattered; Margaret lives in Forbye and she has a baby girl. And perhaps Clem has not told you that my own Cathie is nearly two and a half."

In the moment of silence she did not dare to look back.

"No, I don't think he did."

"The pot will stand a drop more water, dear; or shall I make some fresh? Two and a half, Cathie? But that's a delightful age!"

"Yes. I'm afraid you must be shocked."

Surely not good ground now, but stones and thorny.

"My dear, I'm an old woman! I've tried to bring up my boys to be aware of dangers, as I'm sure your mother did, but I always do say it's no use crying over spilt milk. I only hope you will forgive me for feeling most terribly interested!"

Cathie's laugh was a nervous flutter of relief. Somehow she would have liked to kiss his mother, but that would have been too daft.

"So now you know how it is."

Mrs. Taverner turned to her daughter-in-law.

"Perhaps, dear, you will make us some fresh tea? It will help to take our minds on to happier days."

She waited until they were left together.

"I am so happy that you told me, dear girl; I do feel now that I really know you."

Cathie herself had sensed that a strain had gone from between them.

"At any rate, you know the worst of me; and you were sweet not even to shudder."

"My darling . . ." She looked over her shoulder and leaned towards Cathie. ". . . I couldn't tell anyone but you, and I wouldn't like my boys to know; but perhaps in my young days I was not always quite what I would have hoped any girl of my own to be. Sometimes I feel that may have been why it was not seen fit to grant me one. And yet I know I'm not being punished any more, even supposing, now I have the girls my sons choose."

In her own charming way she was hinting that in spite of everything she still approved, if that should be how the wind was to veer.

"One you have is lovely," said Cathie, and meant it.

"Something tells me that my other boys are going to be quite as fortunate."

Cathie's lashes drooped; she felt suddenly that she was being what Mary would call a shyner.

"I hope you are right," she said. "Especially for Clem, because I am rather fond of him."

Clement was saying, "We can't go back next week without seeing Wellow under this moon. I've walked Forbye with you, now you owe it to me to take a look at our part of the world."

"She has already seen it in daylight," said his father. "She was down in the village with me again this morning."

They were clearing the supper things from the table, the men still sitting, tired from the harvest fields and wanting their beds, ganting so wide you could fall in.

"Did Dad show you all the place?"

"Well, there might be one or two little spots he missed," said Mrs. Taverner.

"I would like to see them; and I think I ought to, don't you?"

Clem held out his hand to invite her.

His mother came with them to the path.

"It is a lovely night. I may have gone to bed before you are in, so I'll say good-night."

She kissed him.

"Good-night, Mother."

She turned to Cathie, the three of them just out of the lamplight where it shone into the garden and flung a stream of green in with the white lawn there.

"Cathie darling, I have loved your hair from the moment I saw it, but it seemed specially lovely this evening. Good-night, dear; don't let him keep you out too late."

And she kissed her fondly on both cheeks.

"Good-night, Mrs. Taverner; you are all so kind to me!"

They leaned on the gate of one of the higher fields, still uncut.

"We shall be doing this tomorrow," he said.

"And tomorrow, and tomorrow; and then I must go home."

Under the moon the blonde barley beards streamed harvest-white.

"Cathie . . ." and he dropped his voice as the whole world listened. "Mother kissed you."

"I was wondering if you had noticed."

He laughed through her hair; the easy, winning male.

"You remember you promised me that if she did . . ."

"Yes?"

"I had made up my mind that I couldn't waste any more of this short time together."

"And then she kissed me."

There was honeysuckle high at the top of the hedge. He remembered too that here the air sometimes carried from the clover fields under the chalk downs, from the white and rosy banks of hawthorns in May, and the evening scented bean-fields of early summer, soft and sweet as her breath.

"Oh, Clem, I do so love you!"

The barley whispered, as if this kissing was like a sighing breeze to set the heads asway.

"That's fine; because I've got my heart as hopelessly entangled as a sticky-Willie in your hair."

"Hopelessly?"

"I'll never get clear!"

"Isn't that too bad?"

"You'll just have to marry me; everyone seems to expect it, so you might as well get used to the idea."

"Well, I'm not complaining," she said. "You're rather sweet."

"How soon then, Cathie?"

"I don't mind . . . how soon."

The ash-white field stirred and sighed, promising to tell some tales once the sun was up.

CHAPTER XV

IT was queer the way life brewed around you in Forbye; some folk sniffed at it with disgust on their faces, as if it was poor kitchen, but you had enjoyed it more times than you had boaked; here something new was flung into it, there a ladleful was dipped out, but still it went on much the same.

Cathie had finished with the beauty shop and was getting things together for being married as soon as they could find a place of their own; half the young women in the town it seemed were doing the same, and you had to be up early in the morning if you wanted a door key in your own hand. Her father had offered again to set her up in business in the city; she could go in easily enough from Forbye and he had thought she might be happier than with being by herself when Clem would be away all the day. She had not said yes or no for the present; she would leave it just at first; the truth was she half-hoped Clem would get a transfer and they could be off by autumn, to some place new and quite on their own, where if things happened as she hoped they might, the whole town would not have its eyes on her.

And so when the old doiterer in Flechan Street left his front door ajar one morning for the good woman who would be coming in to clean his house up a bit, and toddled back into his living room and died quietly in his chair with his boots beside him and his slippered feet at ease on the fender, where she found him and brought the doctor, Jimmy Muirburn went straight across to the Moulds' and they phoned the factor's office, telling him to hold on until they knew if the house was wanted by Clem and Cathie. Along with the police, Jimmy had been there before anyone, and because the last time they had been called out together it had been he who had put the detective up to getting a place for himself, they were ready enough to keep everything quiet until Mr. Mould had it all fixed up, and his man was measuring for Cathie's curtains and writing it down in his book underneath his other tapings, before folk knew the old man was dead.

The house was already known to Jimmy; the old man had been his patient, although he had buried his wife before Jimmy's time and the partners had handed him over when years later he had begun to make calls on them again. It was the end one of a row standing a few feet back from the pavement, with a low wall carrying the ugly ironwork inseparable from respectability in Forbye, enclosing a tiny plot of sour and weedy earth and rhododendrons under the front window. The gate, if it had been oiled, would not have let out the warning screech with every caller, that set the lace curtains of the neighbours stirring behind the closed sashes. It had two steps up to the front door, and all along that row the bottom step was never dry, but kept a dampness on the reddened or whitened surface, soaking it up from the ground like a wick and encouraging the green mould that crept about the walls. Overhead the small thick slates pulled down the roof in a scowl, and the dormer window of the one bedroom was clapped on to the front like a discoloured badge to distinguish it from cottages further up the street.

From other parts of the town, that looked across to the back of this lower side of Flechan Street, you could see iron-framed skylights ventilating the dovecotes under the slates, tiny attics used for one thing and another according to the families, as bedrooms, for lumber, and in this case it was actually fitted as a bathroom and painted an arsenical green, cracked and veined and clammy, as if it had never lost its poisonous dampness; Jimmy said that this should please Cathie, she was so fond of green.

Even when they were married she wore green, a suit made for her by MacNiece's; he had fitted her himself with as much care as if it was his own daughter that was getting married, and when he gave her the bill it was for no more than it might have cost him for the tweed, he said the rest was his pleasure, and that she was worth a half-page in the *Fugleman* to the business any day. Some made out that it was an unlucky colour for a buckling and no good would come of it, that all her life she had gone at things caurrie-fisted, getting the cart before the horse, and it was like her now to start off on the wrong foot.

The night when Mrs. Healy had been telling Clem this talk, a shroud formed on the candle; she leaned across the

table and nipped out the flame. The wick had gone sooty and the grease overflowed down the side.

"I don't like it to do that," she had said.

"A fearful waste of candle."

He was teasing her.

"It is towards you, anyway; this time."

"Should I blanch?"

"Do as you like. It's no' lucky. I can tell you that."

"Fient-a-bit!" Sheilie had said. "Cathie's got herself a lovely man, and she is luck enough for Clem. And as for all that green . . . long ago they used to say she had a green gown in her bottom drawer. Well, this'll be her wearing it!"

He had not known what she meant until Mrs. Healy explained that if a girl came home with grass stains on her frock the old wives said it, and believed the worst of her. But this green was quiet, like the wedding; there was none of Margaret's red carpet nor a reception at the *Grosvenor* . . . *Gaelic Spoken* . . . indeed, Margaret called it a hole and corner affair. They might as well have been thoroughly common, with a breakfast of steak pies and ice cream at *Bonomi's* . . . *Garlic Spoken* . . . and had young Cathie eating it all happily on her granny's knee. Even then Catherine only smiled, quiet and happy; nothing could hurt her now, she was in love and pleased with all the world and mightily with Clem; she just turned the new thin wire on her finger and patted her hair, knowing it was almost a match and only doing it to make up to her husband.

"I'm an honest woman now, Jimmy! How do I look?"

"You look a treat, but no better than you should be."

She could even forgive him today, knowing he was envious of Clem and the honeymoon they were going together, even to the point of letting Margaret see; he would be thinking of how all this time she had frozen against him, looking pure as snow and quite as cold, and comparing with it the warmth she had for Clem, and the promises that perhaps escaped when her eyes smiled at him, and Jimmy would be making a safe bet that it would be slushy underfoot when she melted.

The heartbreak of being in love, and not knowing whether he felt in the same way for you, of not being sure, that was over; you could relax now against your faith in each other,

satisfied and trustful, and watch others sorting themselves out, scrambling for their mates, breaking their hearts one day and happy as queans the next. For a few days they were being away; she had told Clem she was taking him where he could see that Forbye was not all that they had in the north, that every beauty was not down at Wellow. And he had said he did not mind how much beauty he saw, so long as she was part of it; he was ready for anything, rain, sleet or snow; he had packed his mack and his gumboots and a lot more besides.

CHAPTER XVI

AFTER the light on the hills and the gleam of far away water and the peace of lasting things, the little house on Flechan Street seemed cramped and dark. It had for Cathie a darkness coming not so much from the narrow deep windows and heavy paperings, but from within itself; it seemed to have been built so that an elbow of wall, a bend of the stair or a sloping gable cut off the direct light from each window. Although at first glance the house had not appeared to be dirty, at the second you wondered if in all the past forty years it had ever been thoroughly cleaned; the junk was out of the yard but she had not yet tackled the wash-house shelf, any amount of rubbish there; a partly emptied can of weed-killer which she promised herself should go on the front path when she had the chance, and old tins of dried paint and jars of hardened brushes. Many times another coat had been slaugered on top of the layers already covering the woodwork, but the very colours suggested dirt beneath; the front room, still dark with an unnatural darkness lingering from shutters and blinds drawn against the daylight, was a decorous Sunday afternoon brown and smelled of curtainings and middle class probity and old folks' complaints; while everything paintable in the living room was the colour of mustard dried on unwashed plates.

It would do, they told each other; with any luck at all they would be out of it by autumn. Clem said that if they had been staying he'd have had it done out from top to bottom; if it was started he would get his transfer the next day, and they could spend the money better at the other end. He said too he was glad he had Cathie for his wife, and not a mousey brunette he would have needed to go hunting after, searching through the house with candles.

Autumn came, and they were still there; he was surprised how quickly the smell of November came into the air, from the long-stacked ricks of corn that were at last being opened for threshing, from white frosts thawing out of the beech leaves, held to the ground by the cold autumn haze. Fields

in the morning were misty white and vanished within their own length into the still air, the rigs steaming and the plough team a shadow on the crest of the hill, and the sun low like a new crown piece, a white eye in the heavens; or on some days lorries passing on the road were rimed with frost, and little cars with whitened roofs showed that their owners had left them out all night. And in the late afternoons it was good to be hurrying back to tea by the fire again, behind the closed shutters and drawn curtains; and everyone thinking the same as they passed, wondering as you were who was the nearer home. As the bus sped on, the red disc of sun wheeled along the hedge on the crest of the hill, and on the other hand the evening began to flow into the hollows, filling them until they flooded and spread across the road, leaving daylight only high up where there was none to use it.

He said it was good, getting home to her in the evening; it was grand to have a woman who could keep quiet and not break into a spate of chatter at the sight of you, telling all you had learned for yourself and drumming you with questions. Nothing like that about Cathie; just a smile from her as if saying, *Hullo, you back; that's nice!*

And indeed she was glad to have him back, for the house was lonely; although with a neighbour sharing the party wall, their gates side by side on the pavement, it would never have been thought of as lonely. The backs opened on the same porch, so that when there was cooking next door enough of the smell came through to let you know its nature, mostly bacon, the folk seemed to take a rasher to every meal. And with the traffic outside some sounds of it would always penetrate, and yet they were so small, and so few even from the neighbours, that you would wonder what held them out, or if they did not want to come inside, or if they felt as you did yourself at times, that the house wanted to be quiet, to be left by itself as if it were waiting for something to happen, so that you found yourself shutting doors softly behind you and moving gently over the silencing shadows on the carpet.

With the darker mornings, sometimes he would leave for the works under a smoke grey sky, spark-lit by waning stars and in the south-east wiped and near-polished by the elbow of the day. She would stand looking after him—she knew they said it was a trick she had learned from the English

wives—to put off the moment when she had to turn back into the empty house; and as it got day she would snap out the light, and then quick have it back on again, because the childless quiet pressed in with the gloom, driving her heart down into her stomach with that sense of the waiting.

She thought it must be the same feeling that worked in Clem and gave him the turn or two he had; gastritis, Jimmy said it was when she called him in. She was to watch his food, he would tell her as she led him down the stairs; those cunningly built stairs with the double turn in the dark and steep iron-supported banister. And Clem would call down after them that he hoped Jimmy would have the professional decency to put him under morphia before he started his flirting with her, just to try to make it awkward for them both. It was his idea of fun, and Jimmy would play up, shouting back that if he did not hurry and show himself a man Cathie was coming to see her doctor; and that would bring Clem out of his bed quicker than any pills, knowing they were only waiting to be out of Forbye. She had never told him about Jimmy, but was satisfied that he had guessed, although he had never mentioned it, and knew he did not care now it was all done with, and best forgotten; he was like his mother in that way.

When his stomach was bad it would be a day or two before he was back at his office in the works; he said he could not stay away too long or they might find out the truth, which was that they could get on quite well without him. Even to Cathie he would seem in that short time to be thinner, with his clothes hanging on him, and she would be worried until she had built him up and smoothed away from his mouth the lines of pain. And it hurt her, when they said in the town that it was more likely ill-temper; they said he was eating his heart out for shame that he had not bairned that copper-head wife of his, dear knows it would not have been difficult. Apple Johnnie said he knew nothing about that, but if half the town was to try the same diet they would find it gey hard and indigestible.

And then some idler spread a yarn that he had stopped Clem and asked him how he was going, and Clem had told him all, in every detail, as if anyone cared, on and on until the whole Cross knew the history of his case. It was amazing

how he told it, they said, about his bowels being as weak as a wean's; folk were not interested, they had all had the gripes themselves at times but did not go around crying it to the town, they seemed to know of it soon enough without that. If they could say that of Clem, who would not have mentioned his tummy to a stranger and scarcely even to her—not like Ritchie, who would stand in among his grocery and tell you for an hour about his old trouble—she had a fair idea what they could do with her. They said it only showed what a flinty piece he was married on, with no sympathy for a man when he was out of sorts, nor patience to listen to his ginning in the way a decent wife would, and to give him a sup at something heartening to bind his stomach, a hot clout or a rubber bag. Instead folk could tell how she had never been known to lift a hand to help him, let alone cuiter him up a bit when he felt sick; they said her red kind were like that, treating their menfolk as studbeasts, so that if they fell ailing they would as soon take a gun to them as give them a kind word, and likely carrying on with the doctor every time they had him in the house.

That was the way talk ran in Forbye; all save a few had minds like sewers, you could almost get the stench of them as they spoke, or maybe it was their breath, as they laughed and laid a finger to their nose. It mattered little enough.

Margaret had it from Phemie, and from her understanding persons, and she heard it all in the shops; no doubt it was not true, she was not worrying; those who repeated it would have stopped at perjuring themselves had she tried to nail them to the truth. For them it was just gossip with no harm meant, and Taverner was an incomer or barely that, a foreigner and Cathie something of a stranger, and no doubt with more stains on her character than she had found time to take out.

While they taled about her they were perhaps leaving better folk alone, and if she knew she gave no sign of caring; she went her own way through the town, now showing a flash from her sleeked hair, now a winking tumble of curls, and always a smile if there was half a chance to give it.

In the early spring Margaret told her she was having another baby. So was a quarter of the town, it seemed, and

Jimmy would claim them all as he delivered them; it was his lying-in joke to cheer the women and it gave him a fair-sized family, almost another Abraham's.

To explain something she had said, "You see, it is that way with me."

Cathie said, "I had not, until you mentioned it. I quite envy you."

"Well, you have no need to. Of course, for me it is something sacred; I feel more like one does after taking communion. It is love's fulfilment."

"Do you think so?"

She said no more than that; and she could see that Margaret was mad because she would not mention what gossips hinted. Hearing her so offhand, Margaret would think she blamed herself, and would be hating her for such loyalty, when in fact there was nothing to say.

Cathie knew there were some women who could blurt out everything in a great torrent of words, and others who could with a single phrase expose their man, as if you really cared, so that every time you met him afterwards whether you wanted or not the picture of him was there as they had shown you, and he would never again have any dignity in your eyes.

Queer the way she had been wakened out of the first sleep by the clock on the bend of the stair striking once, and knowing the darkness had been full of the sweet heavy smell of bread and milk. The last breath she had drawn had been drenched with it, and Cathie held it against her beating heart, and let it go bit by bit, nervously, and sniffed, half-expecting that it was real, until gradually her nostrils were able to persuade her that she had been dreaming.

Of all that could have come into the room through the open window, it seemed a daft kind of smell to dream about; the fumes of a passing bus, the smell of snow on the north wind, of rain on the street, train smell all hot steel and oil, a smouldering bonfire or a new-lit reeking lum; even the more personal feminine smells of the room itself, her clothes, her dressing table, of all the range why should she be wakening to the smell of saps?

She put on the light and looked at the bedside clock; it

was barely twenty to twelve, the night hardly begun. And at the same moment she remembered that the clock on the stairs had never struck since they had bought it at the sale; it was all it could do to hurple through the day, and they had only bid because it seemed a shame to move it at the roused price, yet the impression that had wakened her had been so vivid that even now it was only blurring to reality. She lay trying to recapture it, somewhere between half-waking and asleep, and in the stab of uneasiness coming with it she put out her hand to shake Clem, and for the need of comfort told him Margaret's news.

"It does seem as though Jimmy was giving you good advice; she has evidently seen her doctor. Did you tell her she was an unsolicited testimonial?"

"Oh, I could not have said that!"

And she knew it was true; there were other women, Patience perhaps, or Florrie in the shop, two or three who were girls with her, and she could have made the joke with them and laughed at it, a bunch of common queans. But not with Margaret. Cathie wondered at that, how she had become so genteel, like one of those who would have you believe they were like the cherubims in the glass windows, a head and no more, save wings and a puff of wind; but they had always a head, and how they could eat!

That night Margaret told Jimmy all that Cathie had not said.

"You do like your sister, don't you!"

"Not nearly so much as you do, Jimmy."

Because he grinned and did not deny it she felt that she was safe.

"But then I know her so much better. No one stands a chance with his own family."

"She would be flattered, with a champion!"

"Not Cathie," he said. "She has her head on the right way around; and it is a bonny one."

He had always said that. She remembered the night Clement had first come to the house, when after they had gone Jimmy had stood back to the fire watching her straighten the chairs and poof up the cushions, his eyes following her although his thoughts were away. She had taken the green one Cathie's

hair had touched and held it to his cheek; the faint scent of her still lingered on it, she must have washed her hair before coming. She remembered he had said then that he liked it, and she had said it was certainly well hennaed, it must cost her a mint, and how shocked he had been, knowing it was not true; as if it made any difference.

"Is this you again, admiring another woman, Jimmy dear? I know Cathie is your good-sister, but let me catch you fingering those copper curls and I'll sort you!"

"I'll not let you catch me."

"You had better not!"

And he drew her to him.

"Come here, Margaret. Did you ever meet anyone you liked better than me?"

"Often, James Muirburn."

"Who was it?"

"Myself, for one."

"And who else?"

"Young Tina upstairs. And there will be many more, but I cannot remember the names just this minute."

"That's fine. Now wait till I tell you; I've never seen a mouth like yours save on a pillar-box, but it's awful easy to kiss. And I've never seen eyes quite like yours, for there is always a smile for me in them. And it is fair ridiculous the way you loop your hair like a black pudding on your neck, but I like it. Yes, I might look at you twice, even in a crowd; and I wouldn't be afraid of you in the dark."

She pulled his arm around her, holding his hand.

"You are a softie, Jimmy. No one but a softie would say such things to his own wife."

"I should hope I would never say them to another's."

"Not tonight, maybe; but there is time enough. Are you coming to bed?"

"Or am I not?"

She tried to push him away, but not very hard.

"I meant are you coming to sleep, so stop your nonsense."

He had always been like that, a terrible man, and she could do nothing about it. If he laid a hand on her it was as if his fingers squeezed her heart until she would have died for him. It had been a lucky day for her when he had asked her to marry him, instead of going after Cathie as everyone had

thought, and to have said no would have choked her like a lie. But now, and with their being parents too, it was crazy still to feel that way; folk if they knew would say she was awful, and that it fairly shocked them, and him a doctor too. He should have outgrown such nonsense and she should have had more modesty, even if others in her family had none.

They were a gey pure-minded lot in Forbye; you would imagine they had no thought but for business, and yet there was not a street that did not teem with weans. And the truth was that they had learned all about you before you knew yourself, if it was only by watching your drying green to see what had been washed, or by marking the day when the laundry called to see when you had last changed the sheets.

Cathie told Clem how Mrs. McNulty had stood at her door the other afternoon to catch Phemie on her way back with Margaret's eggs, to draw her in for a cup of tea and a bite of cake, and to speer was there anything wrong with the doctor's wife, that she was not out herself? and how was the sister Catherine getting along with a husband of her own, and was Mrs. Muirburn more friendly now with the creature?

"I hope Phemie had the sense to say no, and that we fought like cats."

"Dear knows what she said. Phemie makes out that she did not know or could not remember, and yet she's not the one to lose a bite when it is dangled like that before her mouth."

He snorted. "I suppose her ambition will be to come away with the whole cake in her hands."


She knew what he meant; he always had a grand contempt for the credit Forbye took in winning home first with interesting news.

"I'm sure this time Margaret would say she was welcome; she would rather they talked about her being that way than the other."

And the other was how they were talking of Cathie. They said a man with no stomach was only something like a man, that Clem could be no husband at all to a lithesome young woman like her, with warm blood in her and a glint like she had in those green eyes, let alone one also with a head that

on a dull day was burnished enough to take every man's eye and fairly blazed with the first blink of sun. Folk gave to her nature that same rich warmth, and said there would surely be a flame in her heart like the whin going afire, if ever the glow there was fanned by another strong passion. So sure were they, they could bide their time waiting; but they glanced at her on the street, eyed her sideways as they edged up to let her come in to the shop counters, and down at the Cross they watched her openly and listened for the first whisper, certain that it would come, the news that she had been caught up and burned in a lowe of love.

For Clem himself they had some sympathy; he was far from his home and had been sneak-trapped by a cunning woman. They knew fine she had done it simply to poke her elbow in the town's eye, to show that the men were not good enough for her. All knew she had been the same when she was away in the south; it came from her getting in there with a feckless lot given to beer drinking. Alick McCracken had said that when he was down in Newcastle they had it on the table to every meal and all the women could put away a bucket; no doubt she was the same. And it was said that when Ritchie's lad came to her door with the groceries the basket was so heavy that she did not take it from him in the way any other body would do, to save his big tackets on the clean lino and keep him from seeing all the house, but she had him carry it through for her to the kitchen, and it would take more than tea and sugar and a bit of butter to weigh like than. And folk said that rather than he should see the place in all its filth—for although she was neat enough on the street she would be a dirty slut when there was none to see her, like the rest of her kind—she would bustle around like a mad thing just before he came, clearing the week's muck and redding up the house until she could not be seen for stour.



CHAPTER XVII

CLEMENT and Laurence had been friends for quite a while; they liked to get around together, Clem because he came in for some reflection of popularity, and Laurence because there were none of the recognised accomplishments about Clem to detract from his own. Laurence knew almost everyone in Forbye who was worth knowing, and was rapidly improving the list by adding new names from Glassford, the kind of folk who hailed a taxi while you were wondering which car route was yours, who had dinner suggested and ordered while you were looking for the cheapest dish on the card and thinking about the one next up, and who were always persuading Laurence that there was nothing they would like better than to be allowed to give him a jolly little party, for him to invite six or seven of his friends, and leave them to do the rest. He seemed to collect folk like that about him, and quite often when he was out with Clem he would absent-mindedly allow him to take the waiter's check, or be so engrossed in some point of stagecraft that he was trying to get an opinion about, just as if Clem knew as much in that line as he did himself, that he would never notice that the drinks were being ordered, not until with naive surprise he found he was holding a half-empty glass. And all that was rather delightful, for it made Clement feel he must be doing things in the right way or Laurence would have been put out of his stride, and that although he was of the rustic type which instinctively gripped its hat as if terrified of someone coming forward to take it, and wore grey flannel slacks to finish out the jacket of a lounge suit, perhaps it was not too glaringly obvious.

Through him Clem had come to know something of the cultural circle of Forbye, even if it was only to stand on the very periphery. He had drifted in among Margaret's understanding persons and found them most agreeable, chiefly because of the way they got together in their own hives and fanned up the chilly air into an atmosphere in which everyone could be pleased and happy within himself, and could afford

to be kindly and even generous, each feeling that however hard the others tried they could never be quite so good as he was. As Catherine had said, at one time when they had gone into the literary circle together, among all that humid mutual appreciation she was half-afraid she would be starting some self-conscious flowering of the soul; already there was enough about, delicate blossoms, a bit spindly and top-heavy by her standards, but supported loyally by those around. Clement had always enjoyed himself among them; going in, fancying himself with intellectual green fingers; tying up here and there; pollenating with a few wispy phrases those too modest to fructify themselves; occasionally and very gently pinching out the side shoots, but always remembering to leave at home the secateurs, even though Cathie said they needed a drastic pruning and would have been all the better if there had been once in a while an attack of smut. And everyone made much of him, just because he did nothing which they had to praise, but could give his whole attention to them, and lied charmingly about how much he enjoyed their work.

The glass panelled door on Main Street had a card in behind it on the first Wednesday in the month.

*Forbye Literary Circle
this evening at 8.30
First Door on Left*

A number of folk, looking suspiciously booky huddled down inside their raincoat collars and with an arty Bayeux tapestry grip on their umbrellas, all passed by, leaving Catherine and Clem to fear that they were either painfully early or that no one else was going to show up for Laurence's talk.

In the entrance a notice board held papers under the names of the different gatherings that used the place. Cathie nudged his arm and pointed to a bottle neck bursting out through the mica front of the cold stove, and she giggled.

"We've come on the wrong night."

"Shush! Skeil said Wednesday. Behave yourself."

And that first door on the left opened, and Skeil Newous

came out after his head and neck; and she dabbed her nose in her hankie.

"Ah, Clement! We thought we heard the door. And Cathie, how delightful of you to come!"

"Why, Skeil dear, you know I always love it."

"Would you like to put your things in the cloakroom?"

"Thanks, old man . . ." there, it had started already; good fellowship breaking out like a sweat. . . . "Cathie, shall I take your coat?"

"No, I'll just keep it; it is not too damp."

Inside the room, members turned with smiles already on their faces as they entered, all looking as though they were going to enjoy it tremendously in a few minutes. They were sitting on a row of chairs drawn in a curve across two sides of the room, facing *The Soul's Awakening*, with *Me Loves 'Oo* between the fire and the bay window. Skeil introduced them to those they sat among and generally to the others.

"Mr. and Mrs. Taverner; most of you already know them."

Cathie's snood seemed to be riding to the very back of her head. Her hair shone, and the damp had made those curls spring about her ears. Some fingers went to the knots of their ties, and one of the women, tailor-made and no nonsense, leaned back to catch what her friend in the row behind was saying, and then looked across.

"Laurence not here yet, Skeil?"

"We are waiting for him and our chairman. This should be a very good talk; we were a little disappointed last week."

Skeil said the same every time; his Adam's apple was thumping on his collar stud now as he talked to Cathie.

"I have been trying to get Laurence to talk to us for months. No, I've been trying for months; I don't think he will talk for more than twenty minutes, and that will leave time for our discussion. I do hope there will be a discussion; last time we couldn't keep on the subject . . . it was the life story of the prickly pear; I didn't think you'd be interested. Oh, you are? You love fruit? Catherine, you will try to be serious, won't you? Listen, what do you use for your hair? You won't mind my asking, because you see if you told me I could get my sister to try some, and if it came out only something like yours it would be nice. . . . Just the ordinary henna? Are you quite sure it is the ordinary, because I

know she has tried that, and believe me it was nothing like. Very well, if you say so, then it is natural, only I cannot for the life of me believe anything in nature could be so perfect. . . . No, I don't think I am a cynic, although if I am after reaching my age can you blame me? It's just that recently I have become more hair-conscious; I have got hold of some splendid stuff, you massage it into the scalp for ten minutes night and morning, with the finger tips. . . . Yes, Mother says it has a rather peculiar smell. . . . Like geranium cuttings that are not going to take? Do you think so? I can't say I have actually noticed an improvement, although it is rather early yet, but just you look at my finger tips; they have lost all that roughness and I seem to be constantly clipping my nails."

A lady in leopard was drawing Clem's attention, one of several wearing brick red shantung ties.

"Do you loathe verse?"

He started guiltily; at the moment he was not caring a great deal for anybody.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said do you loathe verse? I've noticed you never take any part in discussing it."

"Verse?" he repeated in relief. "I didn't quite. . . . Oh, no; it is more that I don't understand it very easily."

"You are not asked to understand. You are expected to feel."

"Of course."

He hoped Cathie had not heard, because she was turning towards him.

"It does not ring anything?"

"Only his withers," said Cathie.

"What was that?"

"My wife said it did not with us; we are very ordinary folk. I'm afraid quite a lot here goes right over my head."

"Do you not write, Mr. Taverner?"

"Not so much as a letter if I can avoid it."

In his department one of the ways for killing time was by writing novels. Sooner or later, all the folk Clem knew seemed to tell him that they could write a book on their experiences in the works . . . as if anyone wanted to read about such places after he had worked a full shift all the week, knocking

life out to keep it in, as they said; he wanted to get out as quickly as he could when the whistle blew and forget, not go through it again by his own hearth . . . and half of them, stationed where the beer was poor and the girls rich or happy at home, had begun to carry out the threat. They dashed off delicate little character studies and pen-pictures, and had the firms' typists do them in triplicate, forgetting to supply the paper, and colleagues were privileged to see the work chapter by chapter, it being understood by a gentleman's agreement that fulsome praise was expected. Not half bad, the least satisfactory criticism that could be offered, implied not that it was wholly so, but that stuff a great deal worse was taken from the libraries every day of the week, and if they could get away with it, then jolly good luck to you, old man! Many considered that Clem's office was particularly suitable for anyone handy with the pen and, partly because his friendship with Laurence Deyken gave him a nodding acquaintance with the arts, some believed him to be secretly addicted to the vice. But Clem, who read the book pages in the Sunday papers and avoided anything marked down *For your Library List*, believed that today there were far too many people writing novels because they had nothing better to do, and that it was unfair to the British public, even if they were only read for the same reason.

"No," he repeated. "But I do a great deal of reading, one way and another."

How many ways were there of reading? Why must one say daft things merely through burrowing in different strata?

"You are the type we want to encourage," said Skeil, and he hurried to the door to bring in Laurence Deyken.

Cathie thought that Laurence was not a man you could bring in very easily; he never came in as any ordinary person would. You felt he had just at that moment read the line *All the world's a stage*, and this was Laurence Deyken entering it. Skeil as an usher became of as little use as a stable boy coming into the sale ring with a stallion; everything would be all right provided they both had the same plan of action, but if Laurence's differed, poor Skeil would be left dragging at a loose end.

"Ah!" he said, for no reason unless it was pure pleasure. "Ah-hah! Well! Well, well!"

And he stepped very gallantly aside to allow another comer to pass in front of him. Cathie recognised the provost's wife by geographical features more than from her face, which was well inside a mauve head scarf, with the rest of her in rubber boots reaching almost to her knees and a seal-skin coat failing by a quarter length to come anywhere near them. Skeil was explaining that their president did not seem to be coming and if the Lady Provost would take the chair and introduce Mr. Laurence Deyken he could speak to them as soon as he liked, or would he rather they . . .

"No; not at all!" Laurence spoke up, throwing his voice to the back of the room until it almost smacked you on the rebound, and depriving everyone of hearing the alternative arrangement. "Fit me into your programme just anywhere you like, Skeil, my dear fellow."

A polite murmur of chat showed that everyone was enjoying himself; there was some changing of seats as the evening promised to begin, and Laurence on his way around leaned over an empty chair and laid a hand on Cathie's shoulder, so that to speak to him she had to tilt her face and gaze up into his.

"Hullo, Laurence; how are they all at home?"

"Very well, Patience tells me; I must confess I scarcely ever see more than the tops of their heads on their pillows. Away first thing in the morning until last at night!"

"My ideal family man!"

"Now, Mrs. Taverner! Clem, why do you not both come around to dress rehearsal next Sunday? I'll be looking for you."

Cathie patted his fingers as she knew she was expected to do, and he left them on her shoulder as he moved away, for so long you half-feared he had forgotten them. Splendid he looked as he took his place behind the little table, hitching up his bottle-green cords at the knees and then leaning on one arm of the chair, graciously towards the provost's wife. She saw the knot in his claret tie at the collar of his bottle-green tunic shirt was large and very loose; she saw her undoing the scarf below her chin and folding it back in a band, over and over, like she herself turned back the day covers off the beds. And then, everything ready, the Lady Provost rose in one graceful smooth-jointed action and began to speak,

while her hips were swinging gently from side to side as if they had to come to rest.

"... in our president's absence I have been coaxed into the chair ... I am out of it at the moment ... but I need hardly introduce someone so well known in this cultural centre of the west ... so active a member of the Wee Theatre ... often judged our drama competitions, although he has not staged any of the winning entries. I am sure I voice the feelings of others here this evening when I say I am proud we are of the same town, that little Forbye can claim the distinguished and talented artist who is fourth in our series, 'What Reading Means to Me.' Mr. Laurence Deyken."

Clement saw her fold down on her chair with the balanced action of a rotor arm; she might have remained in any position between the perpendicular and the seated, wherever the controlling hand left her. Then Laurence arrived at what must have been the correct position for the public speaker, by the studied use of every one of the correct movements, including a dab at his lips with a clean hankie, just to show that he had one. Nothing gagged this keen student of dramatic art; never a fumbling finger seeking the buttons on his jacket, nor a hand that seemed chained to the keys in his trouser pocket. How impressive it would be if only one could walk like that among the workers, the whole shop spell-bound as one laid down the law, a forceful dominating personality instead of a medium-broad in a once white coat; commanding, a nay taken for Nay! and an eye bringing Certainly, Sir!

He glanced at Cathie; perhaps she was thinking the same. But she had out her knitting, and whatever she was thinking it was not interfering with the socks she was doing for him. Maybe she did not see all this artistry; she could show plenty of her own when it suited her, and as far as he knew she had nothing to thank Rada for; whatever she might put across it was herself, Cathie Mould as she had grown in Forbye, Catherine developed and schooled by the world beyond Main Street, and then Catherine Taverner. In the office drawer, down in the column of the attendance book, it was entered as annual leave, no more than that to mark the best day's work he had done in years, by slipping the golden wire on her finger to wipe the town's eye and set the young clansmen

awhetting their bodkins and off to join the nationalists, to put finis to these pillaging bridal raids on the flower of the north.

In his wallet he kept a fold of sage green paper; he always went through the pockets carefully, taking his time and leaving this behind, and only brought it out when he was alone, because men in these parts made themselves out to be above such sentimental nonsense and would have hooted at the idea of keeping a lock of their wife's hair—didn't she leave enough of it about the house? This was his hoard of gold; Cathie said it was his double treasure . . . Florrie counter Florrie, girls! . . . and that covetousness was a deadly sin; she had never thought to be married for her money, but it was not every girl could buy a husband with a hank of hair. And sometimes, when she was belittling him, she would add just to make sure she had not hurt his feelings, that perhaps he was not such a bad bargain, if you remembered that all she had given was a head like a pot cleaner. He kept it, and it was true he did treasure it like a miser, lusting his eyes on it; but in his pleasure was something of the gratitude that always clamours for expression, in some by singing songs of praise, others thank God fasting, and those they branded as pagans just by going out of the town in a hope of finding the sun and to enjoy all that had been done for them. Against the green it lay like copper threads, a gleam of sunshine in his hand, bright as the day when she had given it to him; and this would never rust, nor whiten as Cathie warned him she would, like the barley beards before harvest.

Green like the rust of copper looked well on her; about the house she wore green overalls, cut in a conceit to show her waist, that she had not let her hips have it all their own way. If they needed schooling, he would notice it; he liked to put an arm around her with a hand on each, gauging her up she would say as though she were something brought in for viewing and found to be oversize; and he would quote to her, *Thou art waxen fat my love, thou art grown thick, thou art covered with fatness!* or sometimes he would threaten that if she grew into a plump wee Glassford body he would start to call her Mam.

Call me what you like, but don't mis-call me! Cathie often said that, and she would be laughing; but he had never heard

her say it except to him. Maybe she remembered, when Laurence was dear-and-darling her up hill and down dale, that she and he and Patience, the whole gang, had run around together as youngsters, and that at one time he seemed to have forgotten it, and never looked the road she was on, until her finger shone just as if he had twisted one of her own curls around it. Perhaps she thought that all the gorgeous masculinity now did not count so much as a wave across the street when Forbye was looking down its nose at her, nor was the soft soap lathered on Mrs. Taverner worth as much as one Cheerie-bye, Cathie! had it been cried yesterday.

Clem looked at the listeners so eager to discover what reading had meant to Laurence; some were taking notes, perhaps they meant to pick up a book when they got home to see if it would do as much for them. Cathie had snickered when she had heard that he was talking in the series, and said she wondered had he done any, between the flick of one skirt and the flutter of the next; at school he would never have learnt to hold the book only he had wanted to make up to Tessa Mann. And there he was now, telling them the tale and looking as if he almost believed it himself, how reading had opened for him vistas of the mind, how the biographies of famous men had strengthened his own conviction that around us all were everlasting arms, and how he was never without a Bible on his dressing-room table because it was the very stuff of dreams, the essence of his art.

Of course Laurence should know; he was the artist. But if Clem had been asked, it would not have occurred to him that an artist's dreams were very different from his own, and he certainly would not have left anything of their kind lying around where a stranger might have picked it up; but perhaps Laurence was assuming too much, that Clem knew the fabric of pure art was woven of dreams most carefully expurgated. All the same, it was a safe bet that the arms most often around him were Patience's, and he ought to be well satisfied with them, most men would; God give me Patience! had been his cry, and He had, and she had given him twins although she had taken her time about that; to this day she didn't know how it had happened, she had told Cathie in the extraordinary way some women have of inviting an exchange of confidences, like men might swap a low joke, and she could

not hurry home fast enough to tell him, her loyalty was nowhere about things like that . . . it was odd that he still trusted her; men were daft, the way they handed out everything to their women and then preened themselves in their importance before their friends' wives . . . and when he had said shouldn't she have taken the opportunity to explain to the poor thing? Cathie had told him at the least he might try sometimes not to be vulgar.

It had brought more than a touch of glamour to Laurence; Cathie had been twitting him when she said he was her ideal family man, but that was the part he played in the lives of many of his fans. The picture he had given of himself in those few moments before he began his talk was the one they carried in their hearts, of his shadow falling beside the twins asleep on their pillows . . . Laurence Night-in-gaol, the laddie with the lump.

It was an unwritten law of the literary circle that without warning the door should open to admit a person carrying a tray full of cups of tea; who she was Clem had never dared to ask, for everyone else seemed to know; she might have been the lady of the house, in a trifling and temporary pecuniary embarrassment letting out her salon, a thing she had never had to do before, except for the gracious way she handed you the cup, complete with biscuit in the saucer to soak up any slop that might have come over the lip, and allowed you to put a sixpence on her tray, and even to take change from a collection of damp coins by her hand, and which suggested that she might be the caretaker's wife making pin-money on the side. He had always found it took a strong nerve to pick up small change from a wet tray, and he liked to put down the exact coin for their cups, because he considered that it undermined strength of character not to lever up any that was due when the charge was high for so small a service, just as it seemed out of place to pay for that service with a fistful of coppers. And some night he knew he would get up and dash for the cloakroom, to find out by that pretence who was the unseen agent opening the door and closing it silently behind her when she had come in.

Tonight it happened the tea was not too well timed; it

came in the middle of a line from Laurence. For a moment attention wavered from what his reading had meant and sidled self-consciously towards the tray; manners called for one apologetic glance over the shoulder . . . go on, I'm listening; two lumps or three? . . . and then the tea won. He stopped and sat down. The provost's wife rose, so smoothly she was surely actuated by hydraulics, and thanked him; those who had no teacup in their hands clapped, and those who had, looked around for somewhere to put it and, not finding any suitable place, tapped politely on the floor.

Skeil Newous brought him over a cup.

"That was delightful. I know everyone enjoyed it."

For one moment Clem thought he was referring to the tea.

Cathie held up her knitting.

"It is so soothing to hear real talk while you are doing this. See, I was able to turn the heel as you were telling us how it was all very dear and refreshing to your heart."

At least she had found something to say; if you could not, it was enough to smile as though you were very far away with those lovely thoughts, and please would no one disturb you just for a few moments.

"Mr. Deyken, you have expressed many of my own feelings about books," the provost's wife was saying, her mouth going like a nibbling machine, chewing her vowels very fine. "I can see their colours spread out and woven into the glorious tapestry of literature."

Laurence coughed, a biscuit crumb in his throat most likely, but over his handkerchief his eyes met Clem's, and they might have been twinkling. In that silky cheek there was room for plenty of tongue without it ever showing.

"Ma'am, I am very happy to hear you say so."

"Now you have started me on something," Skeil said. "The colours of books. What colours would you say a book can have, apart from such obvious answers as the yellow press? Blue is taboo, except traditionally, where it is in the best taste. On the other hand, politically red is frowned upon, unless it is used in salute of something or other; or geographically, when it is popular. In fact, I have heard it said that Mercator's projection is shown at school mainly because it splashes the red and foreshortens all the other colours. And that only leaves us, after allowing for white papers and

black records and Marie Corelli, with orange and lemon and apple-green. I shall have to go into this."

"I feel you certainly have got something there."

Laurence was doing his best; that would be why so far no one had shot him.

"But what have we done to deserve these terrible moderns?"

It was one of the shantung ties, pinned down tight across a flat blouse, with a velour hat and corduroy no-surrenders. "Writing of sexual maniacs, and quite unable to lift their eyes above their women's breasts."

Clem jerked his own up a few degrees and stared at *The Soul's Awakening*.

"A thing of beauty . . ." said Laurence gallantly, but looking too hard at Catherine.

". . . is the boys' forever." Skeil could put enough of the ridiculous into his voice to take away most of the bad taste. "Mother always says that she likes her younger heroines to be at least thirty-four around the bust."

He was their secretary, and perhaps knew everyone well enough to say things like that, and they laughed and forgave him, because they felt that he knew he should not.

Later Clem was glad Cathie had not chosen that moment to express herself, but had saved it instead for him as they were going home.

"Of course among all those clever folk I am an awful dunce, but that projection Skeil talked about . . . at school I always imagined the thing as a kind of spike for hanging up those two wide worlds at the beginning of the atlas."

"But that wasn't Mercator's; his was flat."

"Oh!" said Cathie. "The things a girl has to learn!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE weather turned close, and then in a few days it grew stinking hot; the heat came up off the dirt of the old town and stank like a bad breath, even at the Cross; you would be thankful not to have any call to go that way.

Margaret was making Jimmy gargle his throat when he came in, before he played with Tina, even before he kissed her; although she complained to him that most times he forgot about that entirely if he could not swoop on her straight away. She had to be careful of herself, not to take anything that might be going, for she was getting heavy footed by now, and wearied easily enough as it was with the weather. For the first time, she mentioned to Cathie, she was almost thankful to have a bed to herself again; it would have been too hot to sleep beside Jimmy. And Cathie had marvelled, to think of her like any other woman, happy to have his arm around her, admitting there was good comfort in your own man sleeping close to you. Sometimes Cathie lay awake pitying herself lest she should be left widowed, the nights would be so whisht and lonesome; and other times she thought of those wives who had their man ill and dependent on them, broken at the works or with his lungs gone, and of them sleeping by themselves in the kitchen wall-bed as she had heard they did, so he could rest undisturbed and not be wakened by their getting about the house in the morning to put the children out to school. Sad thoughts, for there was a lot of sorrow in folks' lives; you never knew how near you were to it yourself; they filled your mind as you waited for your man to get back home at night.

With the sudden heat the men were easing fingers around their tightening collar bands, yet Cathie seemed as cool and tempting as the ice cream in a pokey-cone; she had frocks in her wardrobe that had known the warmth of southern summers, and hats to cast a lace of shade across the freckled fairness of her skin. As if she knew that for once the hot copper of her hair in the glowing sun was too much for tired eyes, she kept it covered. Along Flechan Street the damp

faded out of the front steps and the green was less bright on the lower walls; the weeds pushed up with the sun, and she remembered the tin she had found on the wash-house shelf, determined to sort them once and for all. There was no watering can . . . most days the sky was nothing less, you would not want to be drowning things . . . but she had the one with the hinged lid from the bathroom; use what you have and you'll not want, it poured well enough.

There was a ring came to the front door; it would be the milk, he was late this afternoon, although she had thought she heard him go by when she was out at the back, but it might have been the men working on the cables. They had the pavement up there, littered with gear and a roaring pot of quicksilver, and smoking pitch; it was stifling to think of their heat on a day like this.

The ring came again, insistent; she snatched the can from under the tap and hurried to answer it.

It was a boy she knew by sight, in overalls, an apprentice tinker he looked with his tea-cans; and he gave her a dirty-tink look when he saw what she had in her hand.

"Please lady, would you make us some tea?" he said. "We've a drouth on us like a lime kiln."

"I'll believe that; you come back in a minute."

And she took the three tins from him and went in to make it, knowing it was the tea he was after, not cold water, for it would have been easy enough to boil it out there. Not that she minded; she made up sugar for him in a screw of paper, and would have added milk to the cans only she was short and would want the full half-pint on the step for Clem's supper; what was left from the morning would not do more than her own tea, and it might turn if she heated it.

When she brought them to the front door she called him to come; he had a cheeky Irish face, from the Spoutmouth, she remembered, and he would most likely nick something if he had the chance.

"Ta, lady; bless you, that'll save our life!"

She laughed. "No bother at all."

And she picked up her milk, glad that it was still there, and took it in to safety before she went back to give those weeds their medicine.

Sheilie on the way up to her mother's saw her on the job.

"Are you giving them a drink?"

"Hullo, Sheilie! Aye, a drink; first your young pal up the road, and now the weeds. But it is not from the same pot!"

"That would be a when too strong even for him!"

"Or would it not!"

Further on the men were sitting on the kerb to their tea.

"Haw, Sheilie!"

"Lo, Bobby; you got that off Mrs. Taverner?"

He grinned, and glanced back over his shoulder; the rhododendrons hid Cathie from their sight.

"You shut your big mouth, Sheilie Healy, or I'll tell what you got off . . ."

One of the men had put down his can and had him by the throat.

"Shall I squeeze him for you, hen?"

"Och, you needno' bother."

He shook the boy playfully until his head rolled in his shirt band.

"It's nae bother at a'."

If Clem had put in the telephone she would not have had to do this, to run in a coat over her hurried dressing to the call-box at the corner; but he had always said they could manage without it; it sat at his elbow in the office, giving him this and the other to do at every whim of headquarters and he was not having them pull him out of his own house. All the same it would have been useful just now; she did not like calling Jimmy, knowing how he hated to be dragged from his bed, she hoped Margaret could wake him, but this was the worst way she had ever seen Clem, worse than she had ever imagined he could be with the care she had taken.

"Dr. Muirburn speaking."

"Oh, Jimmy! Cathie here. Listen, can you come down to Clem; he is so bad. Yes, I suppose it is the gastritis again, but I've never known him like this. I couldn't call you earlier; he was all right; or at least he didn't say he was not. Vomiting, and diarrhoea; he is simply wrung out. Thank you, Jimmy. Yes, yes! Oh, don't joke, just come!"

Would he take nothing seriously, even if the world was falling around his ears? Saying he would come any night she

called him, had he not been waiting for her to send for him until he had almost given up hope? Margaret would hear him, and remember it against her when she had the chance.

"Jimmy is coming," she said to him, when she was back. "He'll be around in a few minutes. He'll fix you."

Clem smiled, too weak for much more; his hand pressed hers, sorry for being a trouble.

When Jimmy came he ran straight up the stairs.

"I suppose you'll light this confounded place after you have succeeded in breaking my bloody neck?"

He put his case at the foot of the bed and took a peep at Clem.

"Making rather a mess of yourself, aren't you, old man?"

He was taking his pulse, and looking at Cathie standing there anxious for a miracle.

"Cheer up, Cathie! I want to be called out to you next time; I wish you would both get a move on and justify your existence. I've got to live."

Clem was able to say, "Don't hit a man when he's down."

"I get no other chance with you. As soon as we have you comfortable, Cathie's taking me downstairs and we are going to have a nice cup of tea together."

"And just at this moment, I don't think I care."

Cathie pleaded, "Jimmy, please!"

His glance reproved her; did she think he was wasting time? Had he not seen while he was blethering?

"What did he have tonight?"

"Saps."

"Nothing else?"

"No."

"And after that he was sick? How long after?"

"It could not have been long."

"Then you think it may have been the saps that upset him?"

It had not occurred to her, and yet she had to find something. She tried to keep her eyes from Clem's sweating white face until she could give Jimmy help.

"It shouldn't have been; they have never done before. The milk turns while you wait this weather, but it was this afternoon's. And in any case, he did not take it all; he said his heart didn't lie to them."

Jimmy opened his case, and looked over the contents.

"Never mind, Clem; tomorrow night we'll have you eating pork chops and gravy . . . I hope."

Clem groaned.

"Run for a nice big glass of warm water, there's a good girl."

When she brought it he was with his fingers again on Clem's wrist. While he stirred in the emetic he looked worried.

"I want you to get some hot bottles if you can; we shall have to coddle him up, even in this heat. But help me to get this down first, while I hold him up a bit; I ought to have told you to fetch the teapot, it would have been handier. Now, old man, you'll have no trouble bringing this up!"

Over his head as he gulped slowly from the glass, trying to hold down each mouthful, Jimmy tried to cheer her.

"Has it been raining your way? The bit by your door is quite wet; see it on my shoes."

She told him how she had been dealing with the weeds.

"God Almighty, Cathie! You haven't given him any?"

In a flare of anger she could have struck him; how far did he think he could joke?

"How you would all love it if I had!"

And Clem vomited. If his heart had been broken it would have come up too. Cathie kissed the sweat on his brow and wiped his drawn mouth with the towel.

Jimmy was close on as pale himself when she glanced at him.

"I'll need to go to the dispensary; I'll not be many minutes. Don't you give him even a drop of water while I'm away. Get those bottles quickly and put them to his feet and legs, and pile on the blankets. And see here, Clem; take a grip on yourself. You'll be all right."

Going downstairs he said over his shoulder, "What happened to the saps? Did you throw them out?"

He was still on about that. But no, he could never joke with Clem up there the way he was; it hurt to see him. Of course, the milk might have been tainted; this Irish stuff they were bringing in. Fancy milk coming by the boat and being held up for dear knows how long in this heat; it should be enough to poison a cat.

"No, they are in the back kitchen, half the bowl at least. You think then it was the milk?"

Jimmy was short, almost out of the door before he answered.

"That left in the bowl will have to be taken away, remember."

And then suddenly he came back in, and seized her by the shoulders and glared at her, his face pale and sweating and his eyes frightened.

"Cathie, swear to me . . . you haven't done anything daft . . . you'll not have given him anything?"

It hit her like a slap. He thought that of her, and no wonder he was scared. To think she could do that, to want rid of Clem.

Her mouth fell open for the laugh she could feel rising in her throat; lightly but quickly he flipped her on both cheeks and turned away.

"I'm trying to believe you. Now get on with it and waste no time. I'll be quick."

She pulled herself from the wall and went out to the kitchen. Under the geyser a hairbrush of blue flames burst up when she turned the tap; her finger trembled in the trickling stream, beyond control. Cold; cold as Forbye's heart, suppose something happened to him. That was how the insurance men talked . . . if anything should happen . . . soft suave gentlemen trading under beautiful names suggesting purity and beneficence, battenning on fear of the unknown, Christian anti-Christ's prosperous by undermining the faith that you mattered more than the sparrows. Warm now; how warm you are, how warm you are! that was how you played at school. 'Mighty, and you would need to be clever before you found any warmth in this. The benison of hot water, they said, and you could get your death waiting for it; night or day, in a treacling thread, hot enough as it left the spout mouth, but at this rate it would take an hour to fill a teacup, a day to get any in the kettle.

On the draining board beside her was the bowl of saps; it was crazy of him to have thought she could have done that; if the milk was tainted it would be a crime; you would think others must be sick by now; children at least would be upset; even if Clem's stomach was weaker than most folk's, babies would have suffered. It had better go to be examined, as

Jimmy had said; if she had thrown it out he might still have believed his first fear, daft as a kite.

"I'm all right," Clem said, after she had the two hot pigs against him under the blankets. "Jimmy will settle it."

"You'll be fine. He'll soon have you right." The tears ran in her eyes to see how his face had worn. "You're to get better now, Clem; you are not to do anything silly!"

"Don't you worry." And then he said, "Do you love me, Cathie?"

"You know you are everything I have ever loved."

"Then I'm as good as well. I could take some punishment before they got rid of me."

She shut her eyes, so that he would not see her shrink; everyone was saying such daft things tonight.

Wheels braked outside, and then another car stopped behind. Jimmy did not close the front door after himself, but came two at a time up the stairs.

"All right?"

"Aye," said Cathie.

He busied himself; this was the doctor, not Jimmy Muirburn now. She had to listen as he talked.

"We shall have to make sure about this, but don't you be frightened. I'm not taking any risks. I've brought the ambulance along. In hospital we'll soon have the better of what is causing it. You'll be fine by the morning, Clem. Now, Cathie, you just call them in; we cannot waste any more time."

It was the police he had brought. They put him ready on a stretcher.

"May I come?"

Jimmy's face was stern.

"Better not. You go across the road, and I can call you up. Right there!"

"Bye-bye!"

Clem tried to catch her hand, but it was too late; if she had moved to him she would have wept.

"You had better let me have those saps, if you haven't thrown them out."

"I told you I did not."

She brought them, cold and skinny in the half-empty bowl. His hand sought for warmth in it as he took them from her.

He looked out into the passage; it was empty.

"I believe he will be all right. But if he goes, Cathie, you had better take a long walk up the railway line. And I ought to be with you."

At the door he turned.

"I'll ring you at your father's."

She listened to the doors slamming shut, to engines purring and the short, quick sounds of their speeding down the street.

The catch of the front door slipped and it swung open from a passing breath of wind; the house sighed as though it were through now with waiting. The sky had drawn back beyond the brilliant stars, and you could see the silence, except low in the north-east where brassy the day clamoured.

Forbye cocked its lugs in the morning, listened, and licked its thin lips.

The ambulance had passed in the early hours; it was traced back the way it had come through the town, and Flechan Street told everything . . . were the doors not shut, and the milk still on the step, and the brass unrubbed? The newslassie tossed the paper down and hurried off the damp path; folk looked at the wilting weeds and gave the place a bad name.

Isa took another minute on a message and ran home to tell her mother.

"She had cleaned and dressed herself before she came, early as it was; there were red moons under her eyes, and it is not often that Cathie greets. Someone ought to have tucked her up in bed, with a strong cup of tea, and let her have her cry out and then get some sleep; but instead she came and sat by the kitchen fire, just as though she was cold, and I made her take some of mine. And then, when the phone rang, I couldno' look at her, she was so on edge."

"Was it the hospital?"

"It was not. Only Margaret, to know if she was in the house."

"Cathie would be glad to speak to her."

Isa snorted.

"She didn't get the chance. Just so soon as I had said, 'Yes she was,' our Margaret snapped, 'Please to tell her the doctor will phone if there is any message.' And she hung up."

"Imagine! What way should she be like that?"

"Just because . . . have you ever known Margaret different?"

Mrs. McCracken mentioned nothing to suggest that she had.

"And what came over him, to take him so badly? Was it one of his sick turns, that he was under the doctor for at Mrs. Healy's?"

Isa had a sense for news; for a moment she was not parting with the big stuff.

"I was telling you. It seemed to shake her up, when Margaret had not asked to speak to her; she took hold of herself, and as soon as young Cathie was awake, went away to dress her."

"She will find small comfort there, if anything were to happen."

"And I'm thinking it might, for she said he was poisoned; Dr. Jimmy says it might have been something he had taken to his supper."

Sheilie, up with some fish she had off a barrow in the town, heard all her mother could tell her.

"It may not be much more than he had here, a time or two. Do you mind how the frying would upset him, Doctor said?"

"But it looks bad, with him going to the hospital."

"Oh, I do hope he's all right!"

Sheilie's face puckered, ready for a good cry.

"The dear man; he was like a son, I felt it when he left."

"And his poor Cathie; I would have grudged him to any but her. Only last night young Bobby down the close was singing her praises, she must have smiled on him."

Mrs. Healy took hold of the table edge, steadying herself.

"I hope we did right, encouraging him. It would be on us if . . . if . . ."

She could not bring the doubt into words.

"They're saying he was poisoned. Oh, Sheilie, she wouldn't do that!"

Sheilie gaped, forgetting her tears.

"It has been on my mind, ever since Dr. Muirburn said that to me . . . that if ever she wanted rid of him, she'd have little to do."

"Ma, how can you so! She wouldno' . . . but if she did, I'd strangle her with her ruddy hair, so I would. But she'd never . . . No' Cathie. She knew when she was well off!"

Newsing through the town, all Forbye caught the smell of the soiled towels flung into the bath in the silent house on Flechan Street.

"They say it was the saps."

"They're saying he was poisoned."

"I heard tell that she gave him a dose of poison in some saps."

By noon the town was running around, chasing itself in circles as it snuffed for the trail. Now and again some hound gave tongue; from news-hungry stomachs came a windy belch.

"From all I hear he is sinking fast."

"He died the back of nine. It's a fact."

"He canno' be so bad, he isno' on the danger list."

"They say he's slipping down the brae; he'll no' last the morn's morn. Aye, 'sh awful sad."

Patience rewarded lay enjoying the last few minutes of her afternoon rest; the twins were a heavy drain on her vitality.

"You might call up Margaret and find if there is any news of Clem," she said.

Laurence hesitated between affection and discretion.

"You know, I feel I should keep right out of it. There may be nothing at all in what they say, but if anything happens I fancy there is going to be a most unsavoury mess."

"Why, dear, whatever do you mean? How unsavoury, tell me?"

"Of course, there is absolutely nothing in it, but . . ."

And he reminded her of the way Cathie Mould had flirted with Jimmy in the old days, until it had surprised everyone when he married her sister. With any other girl, it would

have suggested nothing, but Cathie was morally unsound or she would never have been landed by some boulder while she was away from home.

"I would not have mentioned it to Clem for the world," he said. "But I believe she only used him as a cloak to hide her passion for Jimmy. And Margaret knew of it; I have seen her wince at them laughing together. She hated him to joke with Cathie, and she never believed in that resistance act she tried to put on against him whenever they were not alone. No, if her husband packs up, then Dr. Jimmy may be in a very sticky position."

Patience caressed her bosom with a stockman's hand. It was a wonderful preparation, one cupful and forty winks in a quiet room and she could put up a record almost as good as Champion Erica's.

"Well, I'm sure I do not wish any harm to poor Clem, but it would cause quite a local flutter, if there is anything in what you say."

Weed-killer. The thrusters seized on the sound of it and blooded all who came in to join the hunt. They had found pounds of weed-killer in him; the bowl of saps was full of it; the easiest thing in the world to find, and the woman was daft to think she could get away with it. They had washed a trace of it from his stomach. When they had opened him on the slab his gizzard was well-nigh pickled with the stuff.

Folk found themselves going up Flechan Street to look at the sinister house, its front closed up smug and satisfied with its dark secrets; they saw the patch by the door and under the best room window, the weeds dead and dying, and they thought of her husband. The heartless red-headed thing; it would make a girl frightened to mention henna the next time she was due a rinse.

And they said a detective was sitting by his bed, waiting for his dying statement; already they had been through the town searching the poison registers, but yon Cathie was a sly one, not a scratch of her pen on any, and the shops would have known her. Where she had got the stuff, dear knows; they were combing the city at this very moment. The inspector himself, they said, was hanging over his pillow, so anxious to ask him if he knew whether Cathie had a lover that he

would not leave the bedside, to explain why she was all set to be rid of him.

Apple Johnnie had said, Jees, if that did not finish the poor soul the weed-killer would do damn-all, he could survive anything; but if he knew Clem Taverner, and if they did ask him that, then the same Clem would up with his pish-bottle and break it over the police beggar's head, quite the thing.

A gey coarse old sod was Johnnie, he scunnered decent folk with his low talk.

Mrs. McNulty came into the town in high time for the kill; it was like her to sniff around and find the brush, lying right in front of everyone and not a soul had spotted it.

"Have you ever noticed," she said to Ritchie the grocery, "those two children, the one of them with the Moulds and the other Mrs. Muirburn's? Of course, we know the mothers are sisters, but is that enough to explain the extraordinary likeness? Why, they might be titty-billies! All along I have considered the secrecy over that affair was quite indecent, and now that it must be clear to everyone that the doctor is her lover, I believe it will come out when this terrible business is brought into court. We shall hear that he always has been."

Ritchie gaped amazed at her triumph, and gradually as it came home to him that she was handing out the greatest news of his career he stammered his admiration.

"You . . . you tell me that!"

She had left the shop before he could remember that she had parted with nothing else, and by then he could no longer call to mind what she had taken away.

"They had a ploy, the two of them; Cathie Mould and the doctor."

"I hear that it was the despair of her sister, poor Mrs. Muirburn; she had known all the while, and been so very loyal."

Forbye had always talked, but today it went its mile. Cathie was down in the mire, and Slobhill with her; all the shocking things you had long believed her capable of were as nothing compared to what was coming out of this mess; and it was safe now to say what you liked, it could not be


bad enough, so you had out what was left of her name and danced on it again, kicked it until you were tired and then ground it under your tackets.

"He was living with her that time he was supposed to be on holiday. They must have been going the pace. And after that would be when she went on the wagon! Is it any wonder she kept it from Margaret?"

And actually bringing home to her father the fruit of her fornication, and then to carry on with him right under the sister's eyes, filching the husband back to her own adulterous ways! It made folk mad to see how she had brought home the murderous deceitful manner of living she had learnt, and in a respectable town cloaked it all with her marrying on the one stranger who was not to know her character.

A downright sinful bed of shame to uncover in Flechan Street, it would break Davie Mould this time. It would show too that you cannot countenance sin; Christian duty bade you stamp it out as soon as it raised its head in your household. All that his forbearance had done for Cathie was to spare her for this, a rough cravat indeed for her white neck; and Muirburn would not look so dapper in the hempen tie he was likely to wear, if the town was to be clean again. At the back of a cart down Main Street, that would be the way to take them; there was something to be said for the good old ways where they made an example of wickedness; it would do some of the younger element a power of good to see the pair of them dragged on a gate through Forbye Cross.

The town worked itself up into a sweat of self-righteous excitement, determined that this time there would be no half-measures. Sin was to have the back of their hand; the devil walking as a beautiful woman was to go down under their feet.



CHAPTER XIX

ABOUT the same time as when the telephone was ringing in the Moulds' hall to take Cathie white from the tea table, a hand was pinning an announcement among the news flashes on the noticeboard in the window of the *Fugleman* office. For a few moments none passing gave it a glance; then one paused, and went back to read. Another may have heard the exclamation it brought, for he too stopped, and read.

It meant nothing to him, but he stayed because he saw the other had laid a hand on a couple and detained them.

"Would you look at that!"

They read, and the woman gasped, exasperated.

"Imagine!"

It became a block at the window; folk pressed around, anxious to see while those already there were reluctant to give way. They read and read again, trying to make more of what it told, fearful of getting less.

We are authorised by the House Physician of Forbye Hospital to state that Mr. Clement Taverner who early this morning was admitted critically ill is now comfortable and there should be no further cause for anxiety.

They mouthed and stumbled through the words; now and again one with a taste of education read them aloud.

"Be jings, I thought he was dead!"

"So he could take it!"

"I doubt her hand was out, else Cathie would have made a job of it."

Forbye felt that it had been brought back to the gate after a false start.

Cathie lifted the receiver.

"Mr. David Mould's."

Her voice was hard and strained; she heard Margaret ask if it was she.

"Jimmy wants me to say that the hospital tells him Clement is in no danger."

"Oh, Margaret!"

"Yes, I think you can be glad of that."

"Did he say when I can see him?"

"He particularly said you were not to try to get in just yet."

"But the visiting day. . . ."

"He may be out by then. Now, I cannot say any more."

Cathie tried to get straight all she had heard.

"I had expected Jimmy to call me before now; it has been awful without any definite news all day."

"Aren't you expecting rather a lot? I consider Jimmy has done plenty . . . more than enough in the circumstances. And he says you are not to ring the surgery."

"Why, Margaret. . . ."

"Good-bye."

Staring at the dead instrument, she wondered whether she should call back, to make Margaret listen and explain. And yet did it matter? No one ever made Margaret do anything, save get exasperating, and if Clem was safe nothing else really mattered.

Davie saw her face the moment she came back to the room.

"Thank God."

And he meant it.

"Yes. He's in no danger. All day I was sure he was dying, and now. . . ."

Jessie helped her to a chair.

"There, there, Cathie! You'll feel better in a minute; give her some fresh tea, Mary dear. It is the reaction. And she doesn't go back to that house, Daddy; not while there is a roof over our heads."

She looked around her table but no one disputed it. Mary smiled complacently over her tea pouring.

"I knew it was going to be all right; I knew he would never croak on you."

Within a couple of hours the phone was ringing again; Mary came to say that Cathie was wanted to speak to Mr. Harry Royal.

"Mrs. Taverner? This is Harry. I've just heard the glad news about your husband. I wanted to ring you up to let you know how pleased I am."

Cathie was touched.

"That is most kind of you, and you're the very first, outside the house, to say it. Thank you, Harry."

"Not at all. I always feel good when things take a turn for the better. And I can imagine how you have felt about him. My word! it has had the town by the lugs this day. Are you going up to see him tonight?"

"No; I'm not allowed yet."

"Oh! And so what are you going to do with yourself?"

"Just nothing."

"I can guess that will mean getting worked up again with a thousand fears. Now look here, there is no good can come from being at home stewing; if you are within reach of a message you will have nothing to worry about. I am coming around for you and we are going down Main Street to the pictures; and ask Mary if she will come too, we'll make a party. It's a promise you have owed to me for quite long enough."

"But Harry, I couldn't!"

"It's the very thing to pass the time while you are waiting for the next bulletin. I am coming for you, and that's enough."

"Folk will think me awful."

"My dear, if you had heard a tenth of what they have thought in the town this day, you would know one more thing will make no odds. Get ready!"

She hardly liked telling them what had been done.

"That is what I call a real kindness," said Davie. "Take your thoughts right off it for an hour or two. A break is what you need; do you not agree, Jessie?"

"Folk will talk, but it'll do you good, I dare say; and certainly, it was very well meant. Away and get yourself ready, Mary."

Cathie hesitated. "Suppose . . ."

"Suppose nothing," said Davie. "I can phone you, and Harry would drive you there before I could even get a car to come around. But that won't be. You go; and Clem would be the first to say the same."

All Forbye knew Harry's car, and knew the passenger who stepped out when the attendant came to open her door. Cathie had done all she could to repair the damage of the day, and although she felt nervous and exhausted she knew she looked at least fit to pass with a push. He walked between

them to the box office, and as they climbed the stairs he tucked Mary's arm through his to claim her company.

In the dark anonymity of the seats she relaxed, and let her mind wander half-interested with the story.

At the first break he smiled at her, and produced fruit comforts.

"You dared me once, Cathie, if you remember. I think I have won."

There was a warmth come in her heart; she knew she was feeling starry-eyed.

"And I think you have."

All day Margaret had been wondering what might happen if Cathie were left a widow; the worst fears began to come to her after she had heard about the weed-killer. She was shocked in the not very great depths of her punctilious household mind at such carelessness, and appalled at the possible consequences, now that at every turn of her thoughts they seemed linked with Jimmy. And she knew she would not be the only one in the town to think, although one of the few who might stop at thinking; the others went on to talk, and she had to listen.

It was Phemie brought in the tale about Cathie going to the pictures in the evening, after she had waited all that day to hear whether Clement was to live or die. By her account, half the town had been lining Main Street when she drove down in Mr. Harry's car, and if it had not been for the respect due to the Royals there might have been rough hands laid on her, to teach her to act differently when her husband was returned from the very gates of death. A score of folk had seen her walk gey calm for all that, out from the car park and into the pictures at Harry's side, with Mary there as a sop to common decency, the first she had ever thrown they said, and she did seem so queanly with her dyed rowan hair. Phemie had heard it all from someone who had hurried in to get the seat right behind them, so as to be able to tell the whole tale that night. Cathie had sat almost as if she was there by herself; she had behaved quietly enough, although at times Harry had done his best to draw her attention. Once when he succeeded—he likely had his hand on her knee or something—she had turned to him, and Phemie had been told the very words she used.

"Please excuse me, I know I am most awfully dull company; but I keep thinking how nearly I lost my husband."

Down at the Cross they had gulped at the gob when it was thrown to them. If that was not a daft act for a wife who was so close to being a widow, and a daft thing to say to a gentleman who had her out, they hoped they would never hear of the same again. Or did you think she had meant to encourage him by telling him it? Any Christian would be scunnered to be in at the pictures with a creature whose man might at that moment have been cold in his bed. Someone said that if his old woman was to do such a godless act as to go gallivanting with other men on the day he died, he hoped he would come back to shame her into more fitting ways.

"I couldno' rest in my grave if I thought it might happen."

"See and you tell her then, Donal'," said Johnnie. "She'll no' want you back so quick as all that. I doubt she'd sooner bide douce and quiet at home."

Any decent body would, they said. She should be back in her own house with a few friends to keep her mind on her God, and not be going out with the gentry.

Margaret was sorry when she heard, and felt that she might have done more for Cathie if she had only thought; but Jimmy had not said if she should, and she had wondered how much he knew and whether it would be wise to be mixed any deeper in what was already the talk of the town. When she told him that night, he went on brushing his hair, although he was looking at her in the glass.

"What would you have done, Margaret, if you had been Clem's wife?"

He would be thinking of the dark house, and the sober household of her father opposite, and the very few friends apart from Clem's own who had ever thought of her as the right kind of person to cultivate.

"I might have done the same."

"Or go scatty. They would have found something to complain about if she had sat in sackcloth and ashes, with a Bible on her knees. You ought to know by this time that nothing would be right, no matter what she did."

She lay in her bed and waited for him to draw the curtains from the open windows.

"I hate myself at times for feeling that way about her."

He flung himself into his own bed beside hers.

"And when you are showing it, that is the only time I don't love you."

She waited a long time, screwing up her courage.

"I think, Jimmy, the time has come for you to give yourself up."

He continued to lie there staring straight above his head.

"If I had the guts, I'd slit my bloody throat."

"And make two more for the orphanage. That would be a very poor gesture."

He roared at the ceiling, "I warn you . . . you can be furious, you can flay me, but God Almighty help you if you try to be funny!"

"So I am to go about like a tragedy queen merely because the girl you fancy has very nearly come to a grim end?"

"That is a poor way to talk of Cathie when she isn't here to defend herself."

Margaret was not having him turn the talk against her.

"Not such poor talk as the screech set up by your own actions, Jimmy Muirburn."

Conscience or none, shame was not putting him off his sleep, or else he had found wrestling with the devil a tiring exercise; she thought he had dropped away.

"All right, Margaret, you have got me down; now jump on my face, kick out my guts; go on."

"Then you do admit you deserve it?"

"I admit everything."

"As bad as that?"

"Every bit."

After a while she said, "I suppose this should stun me, but I really don't feel very different after it than I was a minute ago. Perhaps because I feel if I had always been a perfect wife I would never have suspected; and if I had always been a perfect sweetheart, it might never have happened."

"So you have guessed? I might have known you would."

"Don't pretend to be dismayed. You know very well you were never happy until you had as good as told me; you always wanted me to know."

He ought to be grateful to her for getting this over in the dark of their room, where he could hide his face from her.

"Well, I'm waiting," he said.

"What for?"

"For what wives are supposed to do at these times; aren't you going to do all that Cathie threatened . . . to lib me?"

"Did she say that?"

"And she made at me with the carvers."

"A pity she did not make a right job of it!"

She would make him feel that in her eyes he had shrivelled to so mean a creature that she could spare herself the effort of feeling resentment; she would let him sense that she had always known, and from now on she would show more of sympathy than jealousy towards Catherine; she might let him wonder if it was past her to laugh about him when the two of them were together.

"Yes, I suppose I have known for long enough that you had made a fool of yourself over her, but I could not do anything about it. It was not very pleasant to discover the worst of my own sister, but I did my best to face it because that was my only way to spare you. I made myself feel that while I had nothing to forgive, there was plenty I would never forget. When I think now of what my father did to help her, and us too, by fobbing off the gossips, I know I should be ashamed. But I hoped it would never need to come to light, because she seemed to hold you at arm's length and want nothing more to do with you. However, the children have finished that; they cannot go out together without being taken for sisters."

"If you remember, I wanted them to be."

"And I would not hear of it; you should have made me."

"If I was half-decent at heart, I would have."

She blew her nose, and dabbed again at her eyes.

"I cannot think why Cathie gave in to you; I suppose she just couldn't get you to believe she wanted to be left alone. I've had the same trouble with you myself. If you like, Jimmy, you can kiss me; but you must first promise faithfully to make me be more kind to Cathie and help her to get poor Clement well again; if folk see me fond of her it will make them stop talking. And you have got to behave yourself from now on."

To be so exacting was unjust, if he had done all his misdeeds before they were married; and it set her wondering afresh when he promised, right away.

The knot of folk at the close mouth stopped Sheilie so that Bobby could tell his tale all over again.

"I was telling them, I wouldno' have gone to yon Cathie Mould's door with my tea cans yesterday if I had kent what she would be handing out before the night. It's no' often you take your tea from a wife one minute and she is back in the house the next sorting poison for her man's supper. I doubt that was why she was in a hurry to be rid of me, the mean besom, coming to the door with a can of cold water to fill my tinnies and ready to make me boil them mysel'. But I sorted her!"

He stopped to throw a stone at a pair of mating cats in the middle of the street; they spat and ran to the side and along under the wall for a few yards, and paused angrily lashing their tails.

"You did no'?" said Sheilie.

"Aye, I did so! For when she'd gone ben the house, I whipped out my wee bottle and filled it from her milk jug, and timmed in some water from her old can, so that she never kent what I had done. Laugh! I haveno' laughed so much since the gaffer couped the soyder into his boot!"

She stared at him in horror as she realised what he had done, and what but for the mercy of providence he might have brought on Cathie.

"In the Name! Bobby, is that a fact?"

"I'll say!"

"I tell you, Sheilie, he'd take the fag out my mouth if I didno' put my teeth intill't."

"Ach, away with you all! Do you no' see what the loon has done? Cathie will have used that jugful for her man's saps, and it wasno' water she had in the can, it was the weed-killer."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I seen her at it, while the tea was still in your hand."

Bobby's grin had gone from his face; the cleaner parts showed pasty white.

"God Almighty! You're no' joking?"

"Joking? I am no'. There is half Forbye saying she had given my Clem his death, and the rest yattering to have her good-brother the doctor hanged along with her, and the whole town fair yowling with rage since he hasno' died. And all the while it was you, you tary-fingered young skypal! Come, and I'll make your lugs ring like a Cu'ross girdle!"

In the scuffle her quick clips let a yell out from him that re-echoed up the Spoutmouth, before they prised her off and one held her until she would listen to reason.

"Hold your whisht, Bobby!"

"Sheilie, bide a wee! You can have the lugs off him, you can spike his gun for all we care, but get him up to Davie Mould's in the one piece first. Do you no' see he is all we have to clear Cathie's name? You canno' kill him the night; you must take him up with you to the house the morn's morn, and get the doctor himself, and all the lawyers and the police too, and Bobby here can tell them how he topped up the milk from the old can, and you will say you saw her using the stuff on the path almost straight away. They will get the whole story right then, and that should be an end to this dirty clamour. This has been a day of it sure enough, but now if Cathie's wise she will have the law on the first gob that spits at her."

"Be Jees, you're right! And I hope it is that barren old cow of Lower Jenny's who is the one to get a tacket in her tongue."

He held on while the Irish temper cooled; he held her for rather longer than was quite necessary, for Sheilie made a cuddlesome armful. At length she was moved to protest.

"Hey, Jock, are you milking me? Keep your hands in your own pockets! And you Bobby, you wait right here till I fetch you the morning, and see you speak up like a man or . . ." and she threw her last words back at him as she climbed the stairs, ". . . I'll bite them out, sure as the cat's a beast!"

CHAPTER XX

MRS. ROYAL retired into an offensive silence concerning Harry's side-wipe on the face of public opinion; all Christian tenets concerning the comfort of widows were met by the State's pension and there was no cause for him to be giving them a literal interpretation, far less to go anticipating such events in the way he had done. Not only was it highly indiscreet for a man of their social position to show himself on such friendly terms with a woman whose actions were at that time, to put it kindly, *sub judice*, but, as she had explained in the few words she had spoken to Mr. Oliver about it over and above the one 'scandal', since mental suffering was portioned out to man by a higher hand for purposes best known above, it was not his place to alleviate them and so interfere by well-intentioned spanners thrown in among the scheme of things. Harry would need to understand that his first duty as a citizen was to do well the work he had been called to perform; each must toil in his own small corner . . . the happy ordination that had made the Royal corner quite large in steel and allied interests was not to be sneezed at . . . and it was his place to think of the family name and business integrity, and to leave rescue work to those who were no good at anything else.

Mr. Oliver Royal had listened, and at the next meeting in the board room of Messrs. Kerr & Main-Tennants he had spoken in confidence. A line was very delicately twitched; within a few days departmental headquarters in the city received a letter headed *Strictly Confidential* in an envelope marked *Very Secret*, all enclosed in an official paid registered postal packet, and Clem had had a form, with duplicate for his personnel file, instructing him to report within three days at a works about as far south as they could get him without actually tipping him in the Channel.

Down town with the excuse of looking up trains, Clem hunted out Apple Johnnie at the Cross.

"So this is you and Cathie away. But you'll be coming back again when you can?"

"We shall; and I'll know where to find you."

"Ah, Davie will have run me up to Mavisrigg by then, likely."

"You? Never! You'll be here until you dry up and get blown off on the east wind."

"Maybe. He comes by t'other day and cries me, 'Haw, Johnnie, you're getting a wee bit stiff in your joints this weather!' And I said, 'Is that so, Mr. Mould? But no' half so stiff as you'd like to see me!'"

Clem laughed, although he knew the town must have rolled from its cradle at variations on that theme; to Johnnie he was still the newcomer.

"Forbye wouldn't be the same without Apple Johnnie."

Up the brae the car rails glinted on the wet road; a sudden heat after the shower drew wraiths of trailing vapour across the dip below, and held all around them the sharp blue fume of the buses. Far off in the soft distance the dark bar of the bridge was the focus of every line running that way from where they stood, making a funnel of grey veiling that sucked and poured its mingled streams to and from the Cross, with the smell of petrol and trains, the city-smell of sooty rain, of drying tweed and wetting babies, of folk in their work-duds, and friers' shops, all that made up Main Street and its crowded air; the lungs of Forbye and her living breath.

"No more will it be Forbye without Cathie. They say you never miss the water till the well runs dry, and I doubt many of us will be looking up the old street after this, and not know quite what it is we are hoping to see, only feeling that the days are kind of dull the now."

"Do you grudge me her?"

"I'm no' so sure that I don't; but it makes no odds."

"Well, I won her in the open market," said Clem. "The town can't complain of that; they are all great ones for free competition."

"And that's a fact! Though I wouldno' say you won her. More likely, when she saw you wandering about on your own, kind of lost, like a tick at a dog show I doubt she just thought you were a decent enough cuss and she would take care of you before you did worse for yoursel'. There are many do not approve of our girls marrying outside the country,

but from all I hear, most of them are prepared to make an exception in your case, since it has turned out so well."

Clem murmured about the weight being off his mind.

"Aye, but see you don't leave it too long at that."

"You've no need to worry. Where shall I find Mr. McQuart?"

"He'll no' be far off from the White House; Luke's about opening."

"Then we'll get over, shall we?"

He was right; Alick McCracken and Wattie were as good as at the door, and they lined the wall, dressing by the right where Clem stood at the bar.

"What is it going to be?"

"I don't mind," said Alick, on tenterhooks.

"A hoff and a poff," said Clem. "Three times."

"Come, Mr. Taverner!"

"Make it four, then; if it kills me."

"You couldno' die a grander death, Clem," said Wattie.

"Your accent should be better for a man who has slept these months past with a Forbye wife."

"In that, gentlemen, you all have a long start on me; but never mind, time is on my side."

Apple Johnnie drew himself up.

"I'm giving you a toast. We're old married men and our wives have had no cause to complain of neglect, so for this once we can pin our hearts on our sleeves. Mr. Clem came to us as a stranger and he is leaving us the now as a friend, and it is a custom of ours here in the north to speed our pals with a gift to remember us by. And we are sending him away with the best the old town can lay its hands on . . . and they're clean hands for once, though dear knows it has taken most of the Fanny Slade Loch to wash them. Clem Taverner, we give you Cathie with her right braw hair!"

"Up with it!" cried Wattie.

"Down with it! Thither with it! Hither with it!"

They drained the whisky in the smaller glasses and gave three swinging cheers.

"Red Cathie!"

"A ris, a ris!" cried Johnnie, and his eyes dared any to say that he had not the education of a gentleman when it came to taking liquor.

Clem went up the street conscious that he had been drinking, and happy that it had been enough to cause him not to care. They were all good fellows here; a vulgar kind-hearted wee slut, was Forbye with her back hair down. Pleased that now he would never have too much of her, he was delighted to gather her into a brotherly embrace. He was leaving her to her own kind, Forbye for the Forbye yins, after all the months when he had lived with her, after splashing and dashing and fashing, hiking and biking and tiking, after fussing and bussing and cussing, ditching and itching and bitching, wading and spading and maiding his way about her; and now he was going home at last, to where the sun shone and it never rained the whole day through, to where showers are dear to the earth.

Spikenard with a cluster of henna flowers.

Good-bye for sunshine, Forbye for sin sheen, and the choice of a skirt will be had in Ireland.

Ahead his eyes lit on someone they rejected instantly from his genial feeling that all was forgiven, and he fixed them steadily on her unaccommodating figure and followed her into the grocery.

"Ark, Mistress McNulty, it's shuffle coal the day!"

"Aye, it's awful close."

Ritchie behind his counter and with his face shining sweaty, was evidently agreeing with everyone in strict rotation.

Clem looked from him to his one enemy as she sniffed the air like a nervous horse.

"Yes, ma'am, the breath from my lips should slay the wicked, and the good along with them; it is a wonder to me that you can stand up against it. I have been drinking with the gentlemen of the Cross, a Christian order from which you would be barred, especially after your distasteful slanders concerning a popular brand of weed-killer."

"Mr. Taverner, I do not know what you are insinuating."

He felt that she was seeing shades of solicitors begin to close around her crowing joy.

"But Mistress McNulty, I do know that you are insufferable. I wish you good-bye, ma'am; a good-bye after your own poisonous heart . . . with a pair of scissors."

He turned from her to old Ritchie, leaving her to smart under the fundamental snip.

"Good-bye, Mr. Ritchie; I leave your town tonight."

"Is that a fact!" He took his hand. "Well, I hope we see you back. And Miss Cathie, your wife I mean, is she away too?"

"Of course; she is all I came for."

"We shall miss her dropping in the shop; she is so well known in the town."

Clem jerked his head over his shoulder in the Forbye salute.

"You bell the cat!"

The taxi turning into the Moulds' was the signal for neighbours who had gathered at the gate to follow and line the steps from the front door. Jessie with the toddler on her arm was already in tears, and Mary and Isa were only holding theirs back until the excitement was over. Old Davie followed them out; Cathie trim and neat in her travelling suit, her hat an excuse for displaying her hair to them for this last time; the last, as she had already told them, only for a while.

She had said her good-byes to the family; she had cuddled young Cathie to her, with her heart as near to breaking at that moment as it had ever been, and fought the temptation which had brought a possessive light of battle into the old folk's eyes as they watched for it. It would not have been fair to any of them if she had taken her, although Clem had said she must do whatever she wished. But now she was passing from her own world into his; it was her loss as well as her gain, and she smiled and kissed and comforted while her eyes smarted so that her last sight of them was blurred by tears.

Cries of good-bye, good wishes and shouted injunctions to come back again greeted the pair of them as they came down the steps.

"Good-bye! Good-bye, Mrs. Healy."

"Bless you, hen! And take care of my dear young man!"

"Oh, I'll do that! Good-bye, Sheilie, and thank you, dear."

"Good-bye, Cathie; be good to your darling. Good-bye, Clem; remember me!"

"She wants you to kiss her," said Cathie. "After all, it was Sheilie who first made friends with you."

"I don't forget; good-bye, Sheilie." And he kissed her warmly, and for a moment his arm was round her. "See

you remember me, too. Good-bye, Mrs. Healy, and thank you for all your kindness."

They pressed around the family as Cathie climbed in among the luggage already stowed, and leaned forward as Davie gripped Clem's hand when he had joined her.

"Are you right there?"

"Right!"

"Ta-ta!"

He held her hand as the car turned out under the lamps of Flechan Street; the swinging headlights caught *Maidenhead Avenue* for an instant and glinted on brass in the front parlours, and they were speeding past the little dark house where they had had more happiness than sorrow, with lace curtains in its window now and the step whitened fresh in another's war against the green mould. The trams rattled beside them; from the provost's lamps the brown bird looked at their coming and with his other face watched them go by, missing nothing and crucified by curiosity; while on the wall below rested three old men with the rail in their elbows to hold them up.

Clem waved, but only Apple Johnnie seemed to get a peep of Cathie in the red-gold light from the coloured glass.

A girl brushed her hair before a mirror, her back to the uncurtained window of the room with the evening lights new on; children ran their last message to the chip shops, and played one more game on the pavement while the women talked, rocking gently the babies snuggled in the shawls. From a close mouth a snatch of song escaped on to the street, young voices singing.

*I'll tak' it to mysel',
A ring-a ring-a roses, a copper copper shell.*

They turned down from Main Street at the Cross, kind now and lamp-lit in the dusk, the folk about quiet and indistinct, you would think they were no more than shadows cast by the big hanging lamps on the grey veil that the lights made of the evening rain; shadows of themselves in the shadowy town, searching for the blink and gleam of happiness and the rare play of sunlight among the soft blue stones; a town of old sorrows and young singing, and voices rich with kindness as the warm night air.

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